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HARMEN POLS:

BY
MAARTEN MAARTENS

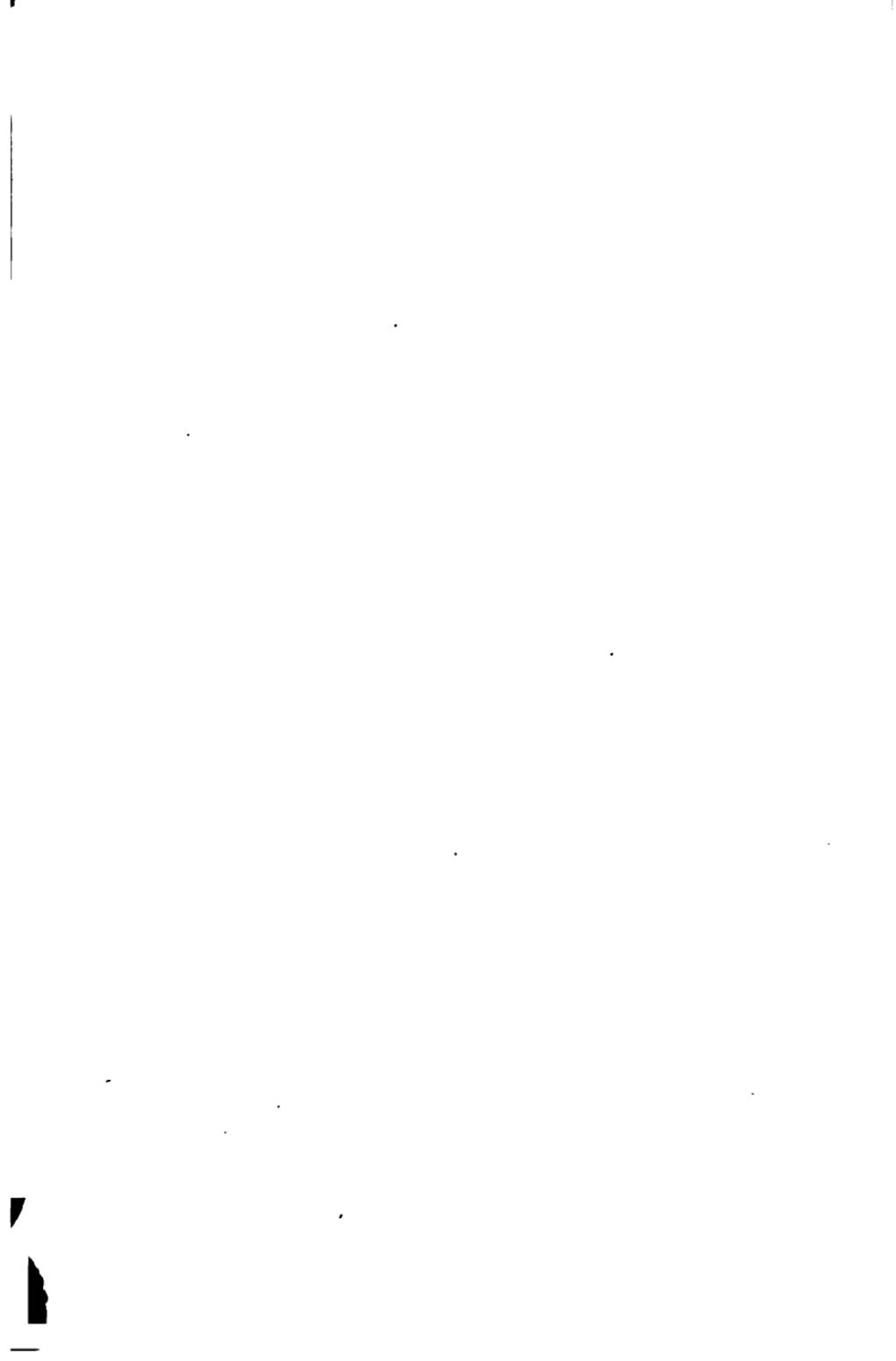
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HARMEN POLS

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

THE NEW RELIGION
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HARMEN POLS

BY

MAARTEN MAARTENS

TO THEE, O IMMACULATE
SCARRED BY THE TOUCH OF GOD'S FINGER,
THIS PAGE OF IMMACULATE CONCEPTION,
STAINED IN THE BEAMS OF LIFE'S PRISM.

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HARMEN POLS

CHAPTER I

THE last gilt chaise had carried its laughing freight down the long, white road.

Young Harmen Pols stood sideways on the little bridge before the farm-yard: he watched the lessening speck beneath the lofty poplars. Lazily he watched it fade into nothing against the pellucid sky.

The wedding was over. The foolish, noisy wedding that had made so much stir, in a three weeks' burst of country gossip. Aunt Carlina, the middle-aged spinster, was the spouse of Roelant Slink.

The huge sun sank low in the amber summer evening, with a flare that spread wide, like a threat.

All day long the grey farm-house had resounded to the screech of violins and the rattle of laughter. There had been garlands and greenery, smoking platters and flowing beer-vats: there had even been the clank of rhythmic hobnails upon a responsive floor. Some young fellow, flushed, in his festive broadcloth, had caught up, towards the close, some full-petticoated maiden: suddenly the whole company had found itself whirling and twirling, with shrill shrieks of merriment, with high leaps and liftings, in dust and in din. Harmen shouted again, as he recalled that swift scene of rare revelry amidst the fumes of spirits, and tobacco,

and young human heat. None of them could dance, these grimly nurtured Dutch peasants, but all of them could caper, and most of them could kiss. If he had not kissed, it was only because he was the son of the house, and because he had never kissed any one—excepting, very rarely, his mother and, long ago, grand-dam, long forgotten, asleep in the long rest that follows on the last dance of all.

He wondered what his father, old Steven Pols, had thought of such excess. And he laughed again, at the vision of the bride—Aunt Carlina! jumping round, with those fierce little squeals, in the lusty arms of young Roel. Father's farmhand! Uncle Roel.

It was refreshing to recall the tumult of that red-hot June dazzlement, where he stood now in the silence of the lengthening shades. The stolid canal crept, a shimmery steel, between the faintly flustering poplars and the far haze of drowsy fields. High above, in the silver vault, broke a star.

“Hi! Come along, mother! Your walk!” He turned back, with a few quick steps, into the courtyard. His call blared like a trumpet in the broad vernacular of his birth.

The clatter of dishes and women's voices ceased in the background: the two men on the bench under the lindens looked up.

“I'll help with what's left of the washing, mother! Let's first have our walk!”

The farm-wife had run out into the open. “But, Harmen, the best dishes aren't done; and your aunt —”

“I've my own packing to finish!” screamed the overwrought bride. She appeared at the scullery-window. Her angular form, lanky as her brother's, was attired in a brown silk dress and much clumsy gold jewellery.

A modern hat, like a basket of corn-ears and poppies, rose on top of her lace peasant-cap.

"Why, mother, you won't miss your walk?" insisted Harmen, amazed.

"I—I don't want to walk, to-day," answered the Vrouw, nervously: her fingers plucked at her damp apron. "I—I don't care to go."

"Well, I do," maintained the son. "How should I know what time it was, if I hadn't seen the corn-factor go by?"

"I'll go," said the Vrouw, in the accent which comes to us when the tempter has conquered. "It's—it's too late for Blass to go by."

"Hurry!" answered Harmen, "I promise to wash Grandmother's dishes. Roel can help aunt with her—" The bride's window banged.

"It's cruel to tease her; she don't take to it," reproved the mother, as they passed, the tall pair of them—not angular they!—from the twilight of the trim courtyard into the warm darkness of the briar-hedge. "To-night she leaves the house she was born in."

"With her man," answered Harmen. "I should like to hear how father is making himself pleasant to Roel."

As a matter of fact, Roel, at that moment, was making himself unpleasant to Steven Pols. He was pointing out, concisely and clearly, that a marriage between a young fellow of twenty-six and an old maid of forty-nine means business. "Young corn may shine green, but ripe corn must show gold," he said carelessly patting his rounded thigh. He talked well, to an impervious white countenance, with a beak like an eagle's and a pendent hooked pipe. To the soul behind the mask all he said took the shape of one changeless word: ruin.

Nothing else in the wonder-smitten gloaming beneath the broad gloom of the lindens. Not a sound but that

boom, like a death-bell. Ruin. With old Steven Pols, and the older farm-house, to hear.

"So she's married!" laughed Harmen, strolling beside his mother. He couldn't stop laughing. What a day of laughter, what a three weeks' courtship of laughter it had been!

But the mother did not echo the laugh, the laugh of the whole country-side.

"Not there!" she said, drawing back. "Not the orchard!" Suddenly he felt emboldened, by the licence and jollification of the roaring-red day.

"Why do you dislike the orchard so? Tell me!" he said quickly. He got no answer; they wandered into the coppice: the heat was oppressive still.

"Father said they might take his own chaise," remarked the Vrouw.

"And 'Freckles,'" rippled Harmen. "Freckles! Roel Slink!"

Half the chaise is mine, breathed a thought from the far-away lindens, half the roan mare! A shudder ran through the tops of the taller trees on grandfather's farm.

The pair wandered along the narrow windings through the coppice in the golden-grey twilight calm. Above them, against the darkening heaven, clear-cut, the small crescent lay tossed. In the mellow mildness of the air, breathing gently, the farm-wife, fatigued more than she would easily have chosen to confess, leaned upon the firm arm of her son.

"Juffrouw Slink!" chuckled Harmen, harping, peasant-like.

"Well?" she answered with impatience. "Your aunt's got her lover. I've always said the fairies 'd bring him, if she wouldn't speak so cross!"

"She speaks cross still," objected Harmen, "to us."

He added meditatively: "I wonder, does father think this was the Lord?"

"Father thinks all things are the Lord's doing," steadily answered the Vrouw.

"Mighty queer things sometimes," remarked Harmen, his mind full of Carlina.

The Vrouw sighed. "What a night!" she said suddenly, standing still. "Boy, what a night!"

Harmen's was not the age, nor the temperament, to find adequate reply. In silence he sympathized, undiscernibly. The warm blood pulsed in his young veins. He wiped his forehead.

"And a month ago she was only just old Carlina," he said.

"Not so old! Not so very old!" the Vrouw burst out with sudden vehemence.

"Goodness, mother; she's four years older than you!"

"True!" assented the farm-wife, as suddenly subdued. "So she is, boy. Five years older'n me," her hand trembled on his arm.

"And that's very old to think of marrying," she added eagerly. "So it is."

They passed forth into the brushwood. The opaline radiance of the twilight opened out before them. Tangled masses of oak leaves stretched fantastic and fragrant, alive with a million quiverings of inaudible life. They passed on through the brushwood. Her bosom rose and fell.

"It'll come mighty strange to her, the living in the city will," said Harmen. "I wouldn't. Not I."

"No, please God!" cried his mother, "you'll never have cause."

"It'll suit Roel to a 't,' though," argued Harmen, beating the low bushes as he walked. "Roel wasn't

meant for a farm-hand. He learnt for a teacher, but was lazy and got stuck. I found out; I didn't tell you, so as not to vex father still more. And he had a fine time as a soldier. They made him a corporal. You didn't know that?"

"Why, yes, boy — it was that photograph fetched your aunt!"

"Photograph?" repeated Harmen. They said "potigraph," both.

"She whisked it off to her bedroom the moment he showed it. Six months ago he brought it in to us — not long after he come,— peeling potatoes we was by the fireside." Now the Vrouw laughed sweetly. "When he looked round, it was gone."

"Pooh!" said Harmen.

"D'ye know, Harmen, often, when a woman lives in the same house with a man, she falls in love first with his potigraph."

"No, I don't know," said Harmen, striking at the oak leaves. "How should I? But I wish I'd been a soldier too."

"Oh, Harmen, not an only son!"

"They take only sons nowadays!"

"They didn't four years ago, when you was nineteen. I wouldn't have you in barracks, in the great, evil town."

"Roel was in barracks. He's a fine fellow. See, the girls listen to him all the time? He's been a waiter, too, in a café. He's seen life."

"And ends up as a farm-hand."

"As the husband of Aunt Carlina! Yes, that's stupid enough, but he tells me he's in love with her, though she hasn't got a cent. There's no accounting for love, I suppose, mother? I'm precious glad, I never was in love."

"No, there's no accounting for love," she said.

"Roel tells me he thinks of starting a pub."

"How can he? They've no money. Father wouldn't let 'em have it for a ginshop, even if he had any to spare. We're poor enough, but Carlina's always lived with us, because she hadn't anywhere else to go to. That was fine of your father."

"And of you," said Harmen. "But they'll manage. Roel said he would. He's quite mad about her."

"Yes," said the Vrouw. "It's strange how often young fellows get caught by middle-aged women. They marry 'em for comfort, and coddling. She *did* make a lot of him! Well, they *would* marry. And all in three weeks. But it's twelve trades and thirteen failures with Roel Slink!"

"He'll fall on his feet, will Roel Slink. 'I'll find means to support her,' he said."

"In my time it was 'Shoemaker, stick to thy last,'" opined Vrouw Pols. "It was 'Rolling stones gather no moss,' in my time."

"Why, mother, you didn't end as you began," ex-postulated Harmen, anxious to stand up for his chum. "You didn't stick to your needle, now?"

"No, I married your father the moment he asked me to," she answered with simplicity. "Though I liked being a lady's maid. And I didn't know him nearly as well as Aunt Carlina knows Roel. I hardly knew him at all."

"And came away," quoted Harmen slyly, "from the big, evil town."

"Don't you never want to go near Overstad, Harmen! There's more evil and danger in Overstad than you or Aunt Carlina ever dreamt!"

"What sort of evil? I should like to have a look

at some sorts of evil," said Harmen. "None of 'em ever comes our way."

"Oh, Harmen, you know there's sin everywhere!"

"I know, but a big city must be a jolly place. Did you notice how well Roel danced?"

"Fiddlesticks! You danced well enough," she exclaimed with a truly feminine sniff. "None of 'em danced really well. When I was a lady's maid — but, there, I've no patience with your talk! The son of Steven Pols, peasant-proprietor, to go envying Roel Slink!"

"Tell me about when you was in service," he suggested, cuddling her. "You've never told me anything about before you come here."

But she made no response. He knew she wouldn't; neither she nor his father ever talked about themselves. He went kicking the pebbles before him. Unconsciously she lifted her soft cheek to the soft air.

Her face had been a blossom at twenty; at forty-four it was a ripe and still uncoarsened fruit. There are personalities whose charm lies in a refinement to which they would seem to have no claim. Her tight black dress fitted admirably, though her own cheese-making fingers had fashioned it; delicate Brabant lace, an heirloom among the Polses, fringed her cap and fell around her still shapely throat. Years of service, from childhood, amongst ladies had left their mark on a nature, eager to acquire a "lady-like" gloss. The welcomed change had begun when her first mistress improved her good Dutch name of "Jaantje" into "Jennie." "And why don't you wave that pretty hair?" had tempted this mistress, an artist who used her as a model. The girl had refused to alter her bands or her cap.

"She might have been his mother; that's true enough, sure!" Harmen reverted to the all-engrossing subject.

"So your father's told her over and over again."

"A bit cruel of father. For *you* might have been his daughter. That's just what I was thinking of."

"I was twenty, and father was forty-one. You can't compare; Harmen." Her tone warned him he was hurting her. He began to whistle.

"Hush!" she begged. She stood still again. "Don't. You spoil it! Hark! Oh, Harmen, what was that?"

"What was what?"

"What a night!" She drew a deep, shuddering breath. "Hark! There it is again. Oh, Harmen—the bird!"

"Why—the nightingale?" He turned to her, bewildered.

She was looking away from him, across the dark sea of crackling brushwood. Caressing as velvet, the sweet air lingered about them. The moonlight had deepened, a silvery dream. Right and left, beneath it, the oak-leaves twinkled and gleamed.

"Is it a nightingale?" she questioned, "I suppose it must be. Somehow it sounded quite different. Like some wonderful foreign bird that sings in a cage!"

"Why, mother, it's just the ordinary nightingale. Why, mother, you're quite senti—silly—what does Roel call aunt, when he pushes her away?"

"Who wouldn't be silly at such a moment as this? Don't, boy! I can't help it. It sounds different. Have you any idea why that little beast sings like that?" Her voice shook.

"He has to," said Harmen. "They do."

"It sounds different, I suppose, since Roel told us, quite different. I never knew. Leastways, never thought. I don't feel as he's a nice man, Roel Slink, but he knows things, and tells things, as you say. Last

winter he read us a bit out of the newspaper, me and your aunt, about the singing of the birds. We was pickling cabbage, and the smell was bad, he said, and he'd read us something pretty."

She put her hand to her forehead. "And so now it sounds different!" she said.

He humoured her, restfully kicking more pebbles where they stood. "I could listen to it forever!" she gasped. "Hark!"

"No, you couldn't, little mother; he stops singing in July." She turned away a little: he wondered, had he again hurt her? How sensitive she was to-night.

"Why, little mother, we've often heard him sing better. Don't you remember, last year —?"

"Last year was last year, and to-day is to-day!"

"You think it's all in honour of Aunt Carlina?"

"Yes!" she cried, "yes — yes; that's just what I think! I didn't quite know, but you've hit the right nail on the head! Hark at him — how he thrills! All out of that little, little body! Don't you know why he does it? I didn't. Never did."

"Why, it's breeding time," said Harmen.

"Yes, yes, of course I know that," she answered hastily. "But, oh Harmen, it's love makes him sing like that! Love, just like people feel! And I never thought of that! Love!"

She pointed. "There he is, somewhere out yonder, hidden away in the beautiful warm night, and the other tiny thing's listening on her nest. All that lovely noise just because he loves her! Just because he loves her, in the cruel murderous world!"

"Why, mother!" — it was all he could answer, the big, handsome, stupidly listening son.

She stamped her foot. "Don't laugh at your poor old aunt, I can't bear it. She isn't *too* old, nobody is

while they've life! You're young, you are! Well, she's in luck, young or old. It's come to her at last, who'd have thought it? At her age, in this place, when she hadn't no more hope! No more right to it! Let 'em laugh! She's got her man, he wouldn't have been your choice, nor mine! But she's got him! Let 'em sneer. She's not going to die without loving! Come away, Harmen! I can't listen to that bird any more!" He followed her, she hastened, almost fleeing, through the bushes. He followed, perplexed. Of course mother had more feelings than other people, but these feelings, on non-wedding days, lay, not on her lips, but in her eyes.

"Hark, there's another!" she cried, pausing. "Hark! On the other side!"

"There's a nest in the Golden Rennet," Harmen began explaining—

"Oh, not in the orchard!"—to his utter bewilderment she burst into tears. She wiped her eyes instantly with dabs that were blows. "I'm stupid about the orchard," she said, struggling. "Your good father proposed to me there. I—we—I had been staying in the village with my mistress, you know. We came here for milk. It was at blossom-time. The—the whole country was one nosegay. Don't, Harmen! Don't fancy I don't like the orchard! How stupid of you. It—it frightens me. Let's go home. Let's listen just one moment longer! They're—they're answering each other. They're trying who can say it best."

"So they do," agreed Harmen gladly sure of his ground. "The smith says—he has two in cages—"

"In cages!" she exclaimed. "That's where you men put 'em! In cages, and then tell 'em to sing! All alone in cages!—and tell 'em to sing! Oh, Harmen, to think of it! Hark, I do believe, that's a third!"

To think of it! Thousands and thousands and thousands! Thousands and thousands, all the big world over, singing by their nests!" She turned back on him—

"You!" she said. "Have you never thought of it?"

"What?"

"Marriage. You don't want to be as old as your aunt."

"Or as father?"

"No, or as father. Things go wrong then—sometimes. It's the great joy of life; you mustn't miss it. Some people do. And it's sweet, when we're young—
young. If you waited, you mightn't be as happy as I've been with father."

"But one's got to feel it first," said Harmen.

"Yes, and that's what puts me all in a tremble. Better wait till you're as old as Methuselah than marry wrong! Oh, Harmen, you must love the right girl and marry her. There wasn't any here, was there?—
to-day?"

"It's a puzzle," said Harmen.

"No, it isn't," she cried passionately. "What am I saying? Only make sure that you love her—that's all that matters! Choose wrong if you must, we can't have everything in this world. Marry the wrong girl, if only you love her! She isn't the wrong one, if you love her, if you love her, if you love her to the end!"

"How does it feel?" questioned Harmen.

She heard, for she coloured. "A man's free in his choice," she hurried on. "And you needn't look for money, that's a blessing. Your father didn't. We've never wanted it, nor missed it."

"I shouldn't mind a little more."

"Oh, you greedy!" she looked round at him and smiled.

"I should buy a couple of real Lakeveld cows, like they say Blass has. And a dozen English' pigs, like Blass."

"Has Blass all that? Why, just now you were talking of wanting to leave the farm."

"Leave the farm? Not I. Only I should have liked to be a soldier and see life."

She played with the laces at her bosom. "You can see life enough — too much of it! — here."

"Never. Nothing ever happens. Not even a conjurer, or a band."

She drew her arm once more through his. "Life can't be all weddings," she said coaxingly. "Nor all lovemaking. I was foolish, boy. I don't know what was the matter with me. I hate Overstad. You must settle down here early and live, happily married, on the farm." They went back by the canal, along the high-road, under the whispering poplars. Presently, in the dim moonlight, across a grey stretch of rich pasture-land, the house came in sight.

"On the farm," she said. "As father does. Grandfather's little farm."

"There's wheels coming up behind us," said Harmen. "Somebody forgotten something? No, they wouldn't come back at this hour. Who can it be?"

"'Tis Govert Blass," answered his mother. Her arm pressed, just for one second, the strong arm on which it leant.

"Why how can you tell?" cried the son, astonished. "It's long past his hour!"

"I know the sound of him, seeing he goes by daily. So would you, were you always about the house. 'Tis his horse, and his wheels." She spoke with a careful indifference. "I didn't think we should see him to-night."

"He's two hours late," said Harmen, "I heard the church clock strike ten, as we came out on to the road."

The light cart with its fast-trotting horse and faster jingle of harness was already upon them. It slowed down.

"Good evening to both of you," said its occupant, and passed.

"Good evening," said Harmen. His eyes appreciatively followed horse and carriage. "Why, mother, why didn't you speak?"

"I did; didn't I? I fancied I did," replied the Vrouw. They had reached their little bridge, the white gate-way. Their home lay before them. She shivered.

"I'm tired," she confessed suddenly. He drew her white shawl around her. "The night was so warm?" he laughed.

"It is warm. And lovely. When everything's so warm and lovely, it does sometimes make one feel cold."

CHAPTER II

THE old man rose eagerly, beckoning.

"They're gone!" said Vrouw Pols. "We can't have been much longer than usual."

Harmen objected. "They might have waited."

"Surely, they were in a hurry," said the Vrouw, "and your father wouldn't be keeping them. He's sick of the whole thing."

"He seemed wretched these last few days," said Harmen. "I'd never have thought he'd mind losing her half so much; would you?" The old man beckoned.

"Now, mother, before we reach father, confess that with her horrible temper, she's spoilt half your life!"

"I didn't mind so much," reasoned the Vrouw. "She was often company."

"Well, I will say I'm thankful to think I can go into the house and not find her. What made father keep the old —"

"Hush! Your father is a righteous man. He would never turn out his own sister. Why, Steven, you've torn down all the festoons! You might have — why, you've thrown the nice ribbons in the dust!"

"I have," he admitted, gazing down at the dim ruin.

"And your pipe — your best pipe!" She stooped over the fragments.

"Did I?" he began. "I hadn't noticed. Let 'em lie. Come in quick! It concerns both of you. Come quick!" They followed open-mouthed.

Indoors, the unfamiliar scene awaited them, with the

grey remembrance of a faded feast. The decorations hung untouched; the extravagantly long table stood bared.

Steven Pols sat down at the far end of it, in his customary arm-chair. Already he felt ashamed of his violence. Much of his long life had been spent in such speedy self-reproach.

"Sit you down also," he said. He gazed at his wife and his son.

"So she's gone," he said.

"You mustn't take on so!" suggested his kindly wife.

"She's gone. She's left us. My own sister. Her name's Carlina Slink."

"Let's hope she'll like it!" proposed Harmen, willingly good-natured, and very uncomfortable under his father's stare.

"Not I!" said the old man, clutching at the table with skeleton fingers. His gaze swept away from Harmen to the flowery inscription, begarlanded against the wall:

"Long Life and Happiness to Bride and Bridegroom!"

"Tear that down," he said, pointing.

Harmen half rose, then sank into his seat. "No, father, I can't."

"What?"

"Oh, Steven,"—the frightened woman sought to intervene. "You know he does whatever you bid him." Steven brushed her aside, "Tear that down!"

"I can't," said Harmen thickly. "It feels like murder."

The old man went across and wrenched the piece of linen to the floor. He turned in the light of the glaring lamp, white-screened and high.

"Left the house!" he said. "Would she had left it feet foremost!"

They waited for more. They waited so long that the good wife recovered herself. "I shall find a dairy-maid as good as Carlina," she said reassuringly, "though she did always say that her cheeses was so much better than mine."

"She lied," said the son.

Steven Pols laughed loudly. "You won't find many more maids!" he said, "and you won't make many more cheeses!" He bent over suddenly to his son. "If your mother can't comprehend, *you* can. Here's your aunt's husband asking for her money. And her money's half of ours!"

They understood, then. This much, that an unfathomable calamity had crashed down upon them.

"He wants half, I tell you!" the old man now hastened on. "Half of what my father left—it was little enough. Half of all. Half of everything: can't you see that? Half of this poor little farm, that wasn't worth dividing! That I thought now—now, at last!—was safe!"

Harmen had slowly risen to his feet, by the table, facing his father in the light.

"Half this house?" he demanded.

"Half of every small field around it. Half of every cow and every calf!"

"Roel Slink?" said Harmen, clenching both big fists.

"Roel Slink, ploughman—to set up his public-house."

Harmen Pols drew from his festive cravat a tawdry gilt pin, a small horseshoe with a whip laid across it. The thing had been Roel's wedding-gift to him that morning: he had proudly exhibited it to boys and girls

all day. He drove it, with still deliberation, into the thick wood of the table and snapped it in two.

"The cowardly sneak!" cried old Steven, his eyes flashing. "Like Sisera! Ha?"

"I couldn't manage that," answered Harmen, doggedly, "but I might lay the whip across his shoulders!" And suddenly he remembered how Roel had remarked, grinning, that a horse-shoe brings luck. The blood surged in his ears.

"What wickedness!" cried the Vrouw, standing, white. Her husband replied to her. "My wickedness has sense, Harmen's hasn't. I don't see the sense of wickedness that's no use." Then, immediately ashamed of this heathenish ebullition, "The Lord judge between him and me! That isn't wickedness. Jael did right."

The woman shook her head. "I never understood about Jael."

"There's a many workings you don't understand about. You're not one of the Lord's people."

"No," said Jennie, humbly. "You—you parted friends?"

"I drove 'em out!" he shouted. "They took my chaise and the mare! My half-chaise! My half-mare!" She quailed before the fury with which he caught himself up.

"They will take half this house," she said, as if to herself.

"Not half, the whole! We can't keep *half*. We must sell."

Both parents started at the cry that broke from the son. He was square and stalwart; he flung back his dark head.

"But if the money's really hers?" he said. He said it with unflinching gaze into his father's flaming eyes.

"Fool!" cried the father. "Hers? To whom do

these fields belong? The Slinks? Who built this house — my father or his, on my grandfather's land? Hers? His? The law may say so. Infamous, like most human laws. God's law didn't."

" Didn't it? " questioned Harmen anxiously.

" You should read your Bible, Harmen. Not your mother's fairy-books. You'll find it in Leviticus. To think how my old father saw it coming! How we talked about it and tried to prevent it, by fair means or foul. He'd have killed her in her cradle, had he dared."

" Oh, how dreadful! Oh, how dreadful! " wailed the Vrouw. " Oh, how wrong! "

" Wrong or not, he detested her; so did I."

" You never showed it. You were as good to her as to — me."

He cast a quick, fruitless glance at her. All these years he had wondered: did she fathom him? Did she mock him, often, or not? Her bearing was patient; her countenance was resigned. He thought not.

" I have done my best, " he said. " As time went on, I forgave her. We bore with her. And now she turns us out."

" She's a devil of a temper! " said Harmen, mindful of much ill-nature, glad, at last, to speak his meaning, malevolent towards Roel.

The old man chuckled, a loud yet dreary chuckle. " Forty-nine long years I've borne with her. In vain! " He remained, with one lean arm on the table, following up his thoughts. " Father was right, " he broke out at last. " She hadn't no business to be born at all. I was a young man. 'Twas a freak of the Evil One. 'Twasn't fair. Not like when you've all grown up together. 'Twasn't fair, I say. He's always going round, seeking whom to devour. He's devoured us."

"Husband, remember the name of this house!" said the wife. Harmen strummed a note or two on his side of the table.

"Yes, so my father said," hastily assented old Pols. "'I called it that,' said my father, 'so the Lord must pull us through.' *That's* in the Bible. When he saw what an ugly mug she had, he took heart. How it all comes back to me to-night! We'd not been two months building—I can see the scaffolding, the roof-work!—when my mother comes to him, poppy-red, and tells about Carlina. Struck all of a heap, he was. 'Never should I have put down a stone,' he says. Then he pulls himself together. 'The Lord'll provide,' he says. 'She's ugly enough,' he says to me a dozen years later. 'Maybe that's the Lord's way.' And I always thought it was."

"Something will happen to set matters right," said the Vrouw. "Yes, yes, we must think of something."

"We must think of something," buoyantly echoed Youth.

Age shuffled to its feet. "Some of your good fairies?" asked Steven, with unmitigated scorn.

"Why not, Steven? I have always loved the fairies. And the Lord is so far!"

"Woman, you blaspheme!"

She lifted her dark eyes—dark as Harmen's, but troubled, unlike his.

"Better to feel shy of the Lord, than to mock at him!"

Again Steven winced. He sat back in his tall green chair and spread out his ten fingers. "So be it," he said. "This is Eben-Haëzar. There are more farms so called in this country. Has the Lord to look after them all?"

"Oh, Steven, and you're the religious one!"

"I'm religious, because, if you're not religious, then where are you, in this world or the next? But I've got my senses. And, look you here, if the Lord was to provide for all the distressed farmers—" he halted abruptly. "There, go to bed!—I don't believe He could do it. Not with the American competition!"

"To—bed!" she repeated blindly.

"Yes, hasn't the day been long enough! Wretched enough? Get to bed. You too, Harmen. Sleep under your own roof, while you can."

"Good night," said the son. They looked after him, wondering to see him so calm.

"He don't care," said the father.

"Ah!" said the Vrouw.

CHAPTER III

SOME fathers think they read their sons. To Steven Pols his son was like his Bible. A most familiar stranger.

Harmen stood by the dark window of his garret, without unfastening a button of his clothes.

Stifling the little place was: that he knew. It would never have occurred to him to lie down by an open casement. Like going to sleep in the middle of the road!

He waited till everything seemed silent underneath him. Then he crept down the creaking staircase and drew a long breath of fresh air.

“Why, I said I’d wash up!” With a sense of relief he walked straight to the detached wash-house, placed, as the custom is, a few yards from the main building. It is so reasonable to do the next thing, especially when you’ve promised to do it.

He concentrated his interest on grandmother’s florid dishes: the excitement of their damp handling, in his strong brown hands, under the paraffin glare, beat down for the moment, all mental worries, as the wind smooths a lake. Presently all the troubles would come rippling back again.

Even whilst they did so, he flattened them out. He was twenty-three; as yet no great joy or sorrow had entered his life. No great emotion. Aunt Carlina’s bad temper had but formed an undertone of nuisance, like the buzzing of a fly, in a quiet room, against a pane. It had led him to appreciate his clinging mother’s

gentleness the more. As he stood methodically drying his brilliantly coloured china, he whistled under his breath one of the afternoon's giddiest dances. "Things tumble right somehow, if we only do our best," he reflected. It was all the philosophy, almost all the religion, his unconvinced mother had endeavoured to teach him, when his heavy-handed father was nowhere nigh. It was all her frightened consolation to her heavy-hearted husband, when their son couldn't hear.

The father had no philosophy, only religion. The primitive religion of a contract you compel your God to carry out. The son had youth and an honest heart.

Still humming, Harmen sorted his porcelain and counted it. As he carefully planted a pile of plates on the window-sill, the latch of the upper pane sprang undone; and the square of glass, falling open, dashed the topmost plate to the ground. It lay broken in two.

He stood inspecting the split flower—a rose—on the floor. Yet the thing was done, beyond inspection. Here indeed was an immediate, irretrievable misfortune that made every other seem putative, preventible, dim.

One of grandmother's dozen of "pastry-plates." Only that morning his mother had said: "Not a chip. How I wish she could see them!" People shouldn't say such things, not even if, like her, they touch wood. They do tell the plates are two hundred years old.

He lifted the broken pieces. It wasn't his doing. It was Carlina's, as he felt with rising wrath. She it was who had lightly hitched the latch, without pushing it down, on to the hooks. Just like her, when she did a thing, never to see, much less to look, if it were properly done. At the slightest jerk it had burst away.

"Well, she'll hate the old cat now," he told himself. And he recalled with acute regret how impracticable he

had found it, all through his boyhood, to make her hate the old cat before.

Then he remembered having heard that the pedlar from Vrederust mended china with little rivets — tiny black specks — “so you really couldn’t see where the fragments had been joined.” He offered a gold piece to those who guessed right. He wasn’t cheap. Harmen had been shown a “Dragon” jar at a neighbour’s that had cost half a gold piece to fit together.

He began carrying the whole weary lot of breakables back to the glass-cupboard in the best parlour. He made endless journeys to and fro, in his stockinged-feet, with bated breath, and strained limbs. All the work did him good. It is horrible to feel helplessly worried, when you’ve never felt really worried before. He moved in everything through a window; his parents’ bedroom lay on the other side, at the back. At last he stood, hot and breathless, in contemplation of the whole precious pile, once more builded up on its gilt shelves. The broken plate hid, temporarily inserted, amongst a score of others, at the top. His mother might count her treasures to-morrow. In his own small sphere the thing had been a very real labour of love.

He made fast the various doors and shutters, and extinguished the lights. And he said to himself: “Gosh,” — the Dutch equivalent — “I forgot that beast!” So he went off again, now past midnight, to feed the bird of which nobody knew but he, in the dark of the toolshed. The bird was a nightingale, recently purchased from the smith for the Vrouw’s approaching birthday. Not actually forgotten, but ignored for the time being, in the bustle of to-day’s feast.

Now he passed through the nearly empty cow-stable, loving, unconsciously, the noise and the smell of cattle

in their sleep. “I *might* have forgotten,” he angrily told himself. He stopped dead,—at a moan.

In an instant he had lighted a lantern, and was lifting it—a blur against the darkness—before the stall of “Long Katrine.”

Long Katrine was a finely marked cow (black and white) with an abnormal length of narrow nose. This latter peculiarity gave her an unnaturally solemn air: she was never seen to smile like other cows. Nor had she the sneer so common to her race; she could only look plaintive, especially when milked, as if superfluously apologetic for the quality.

Her appearance at this moment was even more chastened than usual. She immediately accentuated its melancholy by a louder moan, a more personal note, directed at her friend with the lantern. It was a distinct relief to her to make sure who had entered thus unexpectedly. Really these young humans used their two stumps so similarly, she might have been excused, had she thought it was Roel. She dropped a sad eye-lid at Harmen. She fixed a sadder eye.

The young peasant uttered a frank shout of annoyance. “You stupid! To-night of all nights! Well, so now I must sit up.” He stamped about for several minutes, getting necessaries together, and grumbling. Then he came round to the poor beast again, and sat down on an upturned pail.

“We must make the best of it,” he said in a friendlier voice. “All the same, you’re a d—d fool, Trina. You should have waited another week or two, as you promised you would.”

By no effort could the poor female thus addressed have assumed a cheerful expression, but she manifestly derived comfort from her master’s change of tone. She

put out her tongue to try and lick something, and moaned meditatively, lying on one side. The long stable, at this time of the year, was nearly empty: a bull stood at the farther end, in a planked division: a couple of sick cows and a young calf occupied isolated stalls. These quadrupeds lay silent, in the dusk, beyond the dwindling halo of the lantern. They either slept the sleep of the unconcerned or, more nervous, were listening. The calf, vexed and disturbed, being a stot, started audibly chewing the cud.

Long Katrine moaned. "I can't move you now," said Harmen, reproachfully. "You ought to have been in the small stable as you know perfectly well. It isn't as if you'd never done anything of this kind before!" Katrine endeavoured to ease her position and failed.

Harmen watched her sympathetically from his pail. He tried turning up the lamp in the darkness and heat, but its paraffin smelt so bad he turned it down again. Great shadows gloomed around him, framing in a yellow illumination the one stall which contained the huge recumbent creature, quivering and querulous in her pain. "I wish it was over," said Harmen, his shapely chin upon his broadened hand. He was preternaturally awake, full of novel emotions and impressions, big and little, the day's revelry, the smashed plate, impending ruin, his mother's perturbation amongst the moonlit trees. His skin tingled with a mental vitality very different from the tranquil subconsciousness of his young life's perennial routine. He felt that, however long he might live afterwards, he would never forget this wedding day. A new section of his experience must begin with it. He must face trouble, and human passion. The hour of his travail was come.

The poor animal groaned. He drew out his huge watch. "Hurry up, old lady!" he said, vigorously

nodding, " You don't want to keep me here all night!" She did not.

He strove not to watch her too intently. He tried to think his thoughts. So half their little property belonged to Aunt Carlina! Somehow nobody, not she herself, had ever dreamed of that. Nobody but father who had kept his own counsel, and now this cunning, town-bred plotter, Slink. How quietly the man had crept in! And Carlina, beloved for her own sweet sake, with the infatuation one so often sees in a young fellow for a middle-aged woman who flatters him! Once or twice — on some very great occasion of discord — had not Harmen, still a lad, heard his father boldly threaten to turn Carlina out? Never had Harmen, or his mother imagined money complications. They were just small farmers, little more than cottars, hand-to-mouth workers for their daily bread. Financial entanglements, questions of possession or inheritance, these were an absolutely new conception. No one is so swiftly and unexpectedly beggared as he who has enough.

He went down the long line of stalls and back again. He hated an empty stable. He stopped where he could to speak a word to the cumbrously moving brutes. Unlike his father, even in the open fields, he could hardly pass without some slight notice an animal that looked at him. Roel also nodded. But there are nodding acquaintances which signify indifference, and there are nodding acquaintances which indicate a close understanding. Harmen's footsteps died away; he sat down again. The low wooden-roofed building was full of the quiet chewing of the cud.

In spite of his racial restraint, the hereditary habit of non-exaggeration, he felt, as he would have admitted to himself, not to you, " in a " — using his own language — " confounded funk." He saw that Long Katrine was

suffering more, was suffering longer, than she probably would be able to endure. They had no vet. within call. Steven Pols could not be summoned without disturbing the weary mother. Already the young man had twice half risen to fetch wiser help. Instead he fetched, second best, sympathy. He whistled softly to his dog.

Poker, a distant relation of some very good Dutch shepherds, came running in, delighted at the innovation. He owes his name to the fact that, unlike his relations, he pokes his nose into everything and every one. A barking busy-body, far too interested in the messes of life.

They waited. The dog, between his master's knees, peaked his nose, blinked his eyes. Harmen could wait no longer. He had waited too long.

The sick creature gazed at him with dilated eyeballs. He could not leave her now, not for a moment. He hurriedly laid things handy, fastened a rope to a log. He must act. He must do his best. God must help. God, his father's practical assistant, according to the rule of "give and take," which was all that he, Harmen, had ever grasped of religion. You became a Church member and went regularly to morning service, and when you had need of Jehovah, you called upon His name. Harmen attended church, as his father had bidden him. God help Harmen to help Long Katrine!

He would have laughed wrathfully at your "chaff," had you suggested that he loved Long Katrine. He loved nothing and nobody on earth, or—as well be quite honest! in heaven, but his mother. So be it. He may find some other name, or seek no name at all, for the sentiment which now thrilled him, as he tended this agonizing beast, or which caused him to dream, if he ever dreamed (after too hearty a supper), of the live stock in their joys or their sorrows—their perils!

Awaking with swift bumps against his healthy young breast!

When the calf lay at his feet, he could no longer deny that it was dead. And he was angry at the voiceless prayer that had escaped him, unheard. For really, this time, he had thought something very like a prayer. He also felt mildly astonished. What on earth is the use?

Oh, but here was a more immediate cause for amazement! The natural and the unnatural are ever near to us: the supernatural is just as near as we choose. The very last contingency he need have expected was upon him and the dumb suffering creature, doubling their long-drawn strain. The perspiration coursed down his face; he must make up his mind for a second wait, a fresh effort. "So must you, you blundering ass!" he said, logically, to Katrine. He reasoned with her. "A couple of months too late, and a couple of weeks too soon, and then double!" he said with withering scorn. He said it several times. The dog Poker sniffed about the little carcase. Harmen flung out at him. "Stop that!"

They strolled down the dark alley together. Suddenly the man realized that, in spite of all excitement, he was horribly tired. The first exertion had been such as only a strong fellow can attempt single-handed, the second, when it came, would demand even greater strength, firmer skill.

"Hang it all; mother is right!" he said, as he stood, with pressed lips, ready. "The fairies were here *first*. In the old, old heathen times. And the heathens had cows that calved. Long Katrine, you shan't die, I promise you, for want of fairy help. I've *felt* mother muttering behind me, though father wouldn't let her speak!"

Then, as the patiently moaning victim of nature fell

back, at her last gasp, with long shiverings that seemed to herald the end, Harmen cried out, in the fitfully darkening, sentiently silent heaviness of the cow-house, cried so loud that his call must have pierced to the fields —

“Lord of the Manger!
Hear in our danger!
Lord of the Mead,
Help when we plead,

For the sake of the milk which we gave to Thy need!”

and he made curious signs and noises over the poor beast's forehead, a mumble-jumble his mother had learnt from the old shepherd of Kraaihorst, long since departed. Neither Harmen, nor Jennie, nor the shepherd had an inkling that these exorcisms were relics of mediæval “Papistry”; they fancied them connected with the kindly goblins whom the old shepherd had personally encountered in days gone by, before the railroad came.

“Hear in our danger!
Lord of the Mead!”

said Harmen, softly now, as if listening for approaching footsteps. He set open the door of the shed for the field-sprite. Long Katrine gazed, indifferent. Poker showed a disquieting interest, by continuous jerks of his keen snout.

“Lord of the Manger!” He drew an X over the cow's side, a figure, which of course, was really a cross. As he did these strange things, chanting the while, he smiled — till his eye fell on the dead calf; he stopped smiling.

“Help in our need!”

Judging by the munching and the whisking, and the heavy tumblings, the few other occupants of the building were awake now and uncannily conscious. He held

his breath. "I believe they know," he thought, half-frightened. Softly, distinctly, as if voicing their petition for their moribund sister:

"For the sake of the milk which we gave to Thy need!"— for their sister and themselves — he bent lower and lower over Long Katrine.

"Alive!" he exclaimed. He carried the second calf — a wretched bundle of legs — into the inner stable, and laid it on the straw he had prepared. For a moment he stood gazing down with a queer look of pity in his eyes; then he went back to do all he could for the mother; she must take her chance like the rest of us.

"Thank God!" he would have said, mechanically, when at last he closed the stable-door, but the memory of the potent charm checked the words. "Thank the fairies!" he said, angry with the God who, when asked for life, deals death.

He went straight to the tool-shed, just behind. And he fished out the tiny wooden cage from its wretched hiding-place beneath a bit of drugget. He felt the frightened flutter in the dark; he carried the cruel little box into the perfumed summer-night; he carried it, quite gently, through the loveliness, the warmth, the listening stillness. The frenzied little occupant throbbed and trembled in his grasp. He went on: his roused thoughts, in their new confusion, were of all the wondrous mystery of love, suffering and birth.

Still, as if unable to desist amidst this short-lived dream of Paradise, the nightingales were calling to each other, through the silvery darkness of the coppice. Their music filled the world. The young man undid the fastening of the little wooden prison.

"Get out!" he said. "Find a love, if you can, where you can! Get out!"

A moment's silence — the usual flurry, the usual fear,

then the bird broke away, a black pellet, in the grey, and disappeared.

"The devil!" cried Harmen, stretching his big limbs. "There's worse things than ruin!"

He turned, at a rustle in the moss. Was that a shadow, or a tiny, man-like form, beneath the branches? He laughed, thoughtfully. Were there really fairies, such as his mother said helped her? The old shepherd had seen them in the moonlight. Why shouldn't there be? Nearer than father's God!

He stood, encircled by that unisance of living passion in the luminous intensity of the echoing woods. Something whirred in the air, a night-moth, a dragon-fly?—countless midgets and gnats hummed and glimmered around. He was glad, with a glad relief, to know himself alone in this concourse of resonant emotion, alone with the new impulses that rushed, like red fire, through his blood. A strange world, that had slept hitherto with vague mutterings and gasps, was awakened within him; his throbbing eyes refused to fathom the fierce visions of his brain. His soul, long enshrouded in the cool mists of day-by-day boyhood, struggled forth to encounter a rising radiance of pain and of pleasure, of love and of hate. Life was full of these things: they coloured it: they clouded it. As he stood there, amongst the ecstasy of the nightingales, with all the changes of the unwonted day and night behind him, his tuneless heart-strings tightened, till suddenly, Fate struck music from the chords. He heard as in the distance, sounds scattered by the storm. His mother's words went beating at his breast, until his strong frame quivered like a dust-beam in the sun. As he stood there, amongst the provocations, the heart-rending jubilance of the nightingales, he felt that his own throat was filling with voiceless response to their

song. He felt it, unconscious of feeling, overwhelmed, in his ignorant agony, by a tempest of desire and of exquisite dread. He cried aloud, like a beast that is hurt; for one instant the song nearest him halted; the others poured on, untroubled, in the distant abysses of the gathering dawn. He was sorry to think of the great joy he had checked at his side; he moved away, ashamed. The rippling melody pealed forth again. This, at least, he understood clearly; he had frightened the poor little lover, he, big fool of a man. For the rest he understood nothing that had happened, could not tell why all the dull world around him should feel so hot, and sweet, and strange. He stood, stupid, stunned, well-pleased. It had been a time of marrying and giving in marriage, of travail and of bringing forth. Already the slow dawn was feeling its way amongst the far tangle of the apple-trees; a multitude of wee, shrill creatures was awakened in the brushwood and away among the scrubby grass. He turned homewards; he "must have another look at those two brutes." He went singing and shouting snatches heard at the wedding, not singing the meaning, but merely the gladness and the rhythm. From the wet grass a lark sprung aloft before his feet and soared straight into the highest height of heaven. He gazed up, to the frantic fervour of anxiety that filled the empyrean; he gazed down, into the little nest below, and hurried on. At least, he hadn't trodden on the nestlings; here again was a plain fact he understood.

He hastened on; very slowly the peaceful air brightened around him, from dark blue to paler blue, grey. The world spread radiant and silenced. But he sang as he went, of the fever that swept him along like a hurricane, sang of love and desire and communion, with no thought at his innocent heart.

CHAPTER IV

BY the stable-door he met his father, in the steel-grey morning light. A cold bath.

“Your mother’s asleep,” said the old man crossly.

“Poor soul; she was terribly tired,” said the son.

“Humph!” said Steven, “I don’t pity them as is tired and can sleep.”

“Well, I wouldn’t disturb you. Long Katrine’s calved. Two. One’s dead.”

“Dead? Why didn’t you call me?”

“To let mother rest.”

“Pooh! You couldn’t manage. Tired? This marriage is all her doing.” Steven moved angrily to the door.

Harmen intercepted him. “No, father, it’s mine.”

“Yours? What d’ye mean?” Steven stopped, with knit brows. “ ’Tis the women’s silly talk about love.”

“No ’tis my fault. I put up Roel to proposing.” He spoke on bravely; he didn’t like the gathering scowl in his father’s eyes.

“What’s that you say? Oh, I’ve heard it! You?”

“I thought it’d be a good joke. And a good ride-dance.”

“Joke!”

“Why, of course, I didn’t know she had a cent.”

“You didn’t, eh? Roel did.”

“I’m not so sure,” hazarded Harmen. “He really thought her quite handsome, and such a clever house-keeper. So she is. You’ve often said she was much better than mother. Heaps of men —”

"Peace!" screamed old Steven.

"Well, I'm sorry, father," the young man confessed.
"She must have told him."

"She didn't know."

"He put two and two together. I liked Roel. He always talked pleasant. And he knew a lot o' things I didn't know."

"Psha!" exclaimed the father. "The worst milker I ever had!"

"That's so," replied Harmen humbly. "I didn't mean that sort o' knowing. I liked to hear him talk."

"Stuff and nonsense!" burst out the farmer. "Sin and wickedness. Barracks and gals!"

"Some of it," said Harmen. "And funny stories. I don't say his talk was Sunday church. It did me no harm."

"No," replied the old man threateningly, "it only set you on to talk like a fool yourself. You didn't need much practising. Gabble, gabble and laugh! I can hear you. Like the crackling of thorns! And so you helped him to get hold of your silly old aunt?"

"Didn't I tell you?" answered Harmen, with mild impatience. "I'm to blame. I don't fancy he'd ever have thought of it himself."

"Right so," said the father; that was his extremest retort of disapproval, the preface in younger days to many a memorable thrashing. "Right so."

"What's done's done," persisted Harmen. "Perhaps he'll live to be sorry.

"Take a wife that's too old,
With a bag full of gold.
When the gold's gone, you'll find,
That the wife's left behind."

He thought to appease his father, but the old man only scowled. "I know a truer saw than that," he

answered fiercely. "A fool can work on a farm, but not own one."

"I'm more of a fool than he," declared Harmen.

"I was thinking of you," came the swift elucidation.

"You'll have to go working on another man's farm."

"Don't, father," said Harmen.

"Don't? Who's to don't? Don't *you*! Look you here! It's your doing, by your own word, that's ruined us!" He took a great step towards his steadfast son. Suddenly his wrath blazed forth, in the horrible way they all knew and dreaded, from the grave eyes, the grey face, like a fire-piece, caught by a fusee.

"I don't curse you! I don't drive you forth! That sort o' thing doesn't work nowadays! You've cursed yourself. You've driven yourself out! But I tell you that you're no son o' mine till you've made good the harm that you've done! Save this place, do you hear! This place that your grandfather's made and that I've made, with *these* hands"—he held them out, worn, scraggy, hard-worked—"and that *you*, fool, have giggled away! Giggle it back again—ha!—into your hands, not mine! I'm old and done for: your name's Pols! You'll have to work hard, and think hard, to do it! Harder than your hands'll like, methinks, faster than your brains'll go!" His taunting arm began to tremble so, he dropped it angrily. "I don't turn you out, mind you: you can stop here and come in to your dinner, but don't you speak to me, unless it's about the farm-work, for you won't get no reply."

He had spoken: his anger fell. Outwardly impassive, he lighted his clay pipe. He remained there, only because it was not *his* duty to retreat. This the son understood, who walked sadly, neither slinking nor striding, into the cowshed. It was the one place the

father was now anxious to visit, but the father would not follow the son.

In the stable Long Katrine lay dead.

Harmen Pols gazed at her, his hands deep down in his jacket pockets. Men of his breed do not cry over spilt milk. Agriculture would be impossible. Nature daily, even on the smallest property, somewhere upsets a pail. The whole craft consists in man's effort and Nature's caprice. The cow should have done well: the young man had done his best. She had certainly had a very bad time, but her recovery only demanded a little inaction in Nature. But inaction is just what the blundering busy-body can never understand. She had sent her forces to the weak spot. She had killed Long Katrine.

She had also, although that is less important, badly scotched young Harmen Pols' belief in fairies. In good fairies. We all know there are bad.

He hastened to give a little milk to the bleating calf, a much sadder, and perhaps a slightly wiser, man. Yesterday, on the morn of Carlina's wedding, he had jumped out of bed as light-hearted as any other young fellow who has never known trouble, or guilt, or very great joy. Now, disaster, great and small had befallen him; and the powers outside ourselves, whom his father and mother believed or half-believed in, had all in his swift appeal to them laughed him to scorn.

He undertook, with the lightning rapidity of concentrated passion, all Roel's early work and his own. His fatigue had passed from him under the shock of his father's merited reproaches: as he flung over his shoulder the soiled straw in the stalls, he stretched his young muscles with an electric intensity of stimulated life. He heard his mother gently calling: her low

voice had early accustomed him, amid the shrilling of aunt Carlina, to catch its musical notes. She stood by the house door, holding his matutinal cup of coffee, the first cup of many that alternate with tea in the life of the Dutch lower classes from day-break till bed-time. "Have you slept?" she said doubtingly. "Aren't you tired?"

"Do I look it?" he answered, flushed, leaning on his pitch-fork. "I'm as healthy as a fish, mother. I wish your two cheeks were as apple-red as mine."

She stared at him, in his shirt-sleeves and wooden shoes.

"Why, Harmen," she exclaimed, "you've — you've not — you're wearing your Sunday clothes!"

He shared her bewilderment. "I forgot," he bungled, "I didn't notice. I'll go up," — and he fetched his coat from the stable, flinging back the fork. But he put aside the cup she continued to proffer. For his father stood watching at the window. "Don't, mother," he begged. "No!"

"You are ill," she said. He recognized the extravagant note of terror which the words, and those words only, brought into her quiet voice. It was as if, for years, she had feared nothing that life or death could bring to her but the sickness of her son. A mistake: for years she had feared even worse, with a fear that could find no vent in speech.

"One that does not drink his coffee is ill," she argued, still by the split, half-open door, still extending her partly bared arm.

He felt his dread sire's expectancy: it tingled in his every nerve. After all, had that righteous judge not decreed that he might come to his meals? Had he — Harmen — not already dispatched, single-handed, double

his morning's work? The grey eyes behind the window did not even appear to blink.

He tried to laugh, tried to pass. "Who said yesterday that coffee was poison?"

"Cousin Deborah," replied the Vrouw, with full-measured contempt. "She thinks everything's poison except pills. Are you going to live, like her, on pills?"

Harmen's eyes were a long way down the road.

"Harmen!" said the Vrouw, violently, "you don't take this too much to heart, do you? — about losing the money? Don't let that upset you, Harmen."

"It is bad," said Harmen, glad of an apology.

"There's worse things than losing money, Harmen! What'll you do when real trouble comes?"

"Real trouble?" he glanced back to her in wonderment.

She met his gaze, drinking it down in the sad depths of her fathomless eyes.

"Heart trouble. Real trouble. It always comes sooner or later. You'll smile then to think you couldn't take your food, because you'd — lost — the farm."

But Harmen was not listening to words beyond his understanding. An odd horseman had put in an appearance, trotting briskly along the canal-road, and turning across the bridge. Old Steven came running out. A small boy with pendent blue stockings and cap awry, drew up the astonished roan mare before her far more astonished owners.

"He said I was to give somebody this!" blurted out the small boy, producing a crumpled paper. Steven read it. He called his wife to him. Called his son. "You too!" he commanded. "This *is* business! God!"

And he read aloud, serene, but for that amazing cry.

“DEAR BROTHER-IN-LAW,

“I don’t quite see how I am to return you your half of the chaise and the horse. It makes me feel like old King Solomon. So I send you back the horse—I’m a good fellow: the horse is worth more than the shay. You can make up the difference presently, when you send us half of the whole.

“ROEL”

He turned on his son. “Funny, isn’t he? You were right. A most amusing fellow.”

“He couldn’t send the chaise by itself or he’d have done it,” said Harmen, no longer flushed. He went to the boy. “Get down!” he said quietly. The urchin, glancing askance at the young man, slid off, whimpering. “I haven’t done no harm,” he prayed.

Without noticing him, Harmen leaped on to the blanket that had been fastened round the partly harnessed mare. He turned her head towards the high-road. “Why, Harmen—your wooden shoes!” cried the Vrouw.

He kicked the things from him. “My boots are—there!” he said, pointing. “Get me them, mother. ‘Sdeath, I’m going to fetch that chaise, or I won’t come back at all!”

His father smiled bitterly. “Whilst you’re about it, better bring back the money,” said Steven; “it’s little good fetching the cart for the sale!”

“Don’t over-ride the mare, Harmen!” the Vrouw called anxiously.

Her husband flew out at her. “Don’t you know Harmen better than to fancy he’d ever do that?”

CHAPTER V

THE love-birds had not flown far. They had found an amused welcome in the market-town of Vrederust, little more than three miles off on the Overstad road. The Avenger rode along the canal, between the never-ending poplars. When they ended, suddenly, he rode along the canal, between limitless stretches of cattle-sprinkled field.

His brow was set black, but he whistled blithely. For the radiance of June was all around him: trillions of diamonds twinkled in the sunbeams; trillions of diamonds glistened in the grass. Nothing else stirred throughout the wide placid landscape, except here and there the swift flick of a cow. The horseman alone seemed to speak of movement and purpose as he rode along, arms and legs listless, back straightened, chin square.

Towards the town the bright prospect saddened, dirtied by the too-frequent touch of man. A few hovels appeared with waste land and rubbish. Dishevelled children stared after him, open-mouthed. A cur screamed behind the horse's heels.

Vrederust is one of those little country-towns in which nobody ever seems to be doing anything, although everybody seems always to be doing something wrong. Deceptively does the path look easy along its grass-grown, thickly cobbled streets. Behind its sleepy windows sharp eyes are on ceaseless guard. When the minister, in the great battered old brick church on Sundays tells the town (from ten to twelve) that they are sinners (Aegidius

does it best) the town looks round upon each other, and concurs.

Harmen clattered up the narrow High Street, between, here and there, an aproned shopman or a white-capped maid. If nodded to, he nodded back, but he was not a facile nodder, especially to women. There seemed a certain attractive discrepancy between his smart clothes and his blanketed steed. Presently by the School Square, he had all the street children behind him, yelling in frantic yearning to terrify a horse! Thus he arrived, careering and swearing, hooted and hustled, the central figure amongst a dodging crowd of Yahoos, whom the disgusted Houyhnhnm vainly strove to disperse. The brown front of Aunt Josabet's green-shuttered, scrubbed and polished, residence, with its central door and five flat windows, looked unconscious, yet reproachful, against that howling mass.

He banged upon the door with his fist and backed suddenly amongst the screeching pack. Freckles devoutly hoped she had hit somebody this time.

In the doorway appeared the head only—looking severed and aureoled in red—of Aunt Josabet's delighted slavey.

“Open the back gate at once!” commanded Harmen.

“The back gate? Oh, la! I mayn’t let any one in at the gate,” screamed the slavey.

“Open it at once, and I’ll give you these!” He dragged forth a couple of gilt crackers that some girl, the day before, had thrust laughing into his pocket, “for his babies.”

The maid hesitated, wide-eyed. “Give me a kiss, too,” she laughed, “Harmen Pols!”

“I’ll be hanged if I do,” replied Harmen. The mare plunged, half unseating him. He saw a boy running away, with a burning fusee at the end of a stick.

He dashed after him. The boy ran into a house. He turned as the horse leaped on high; half-a-dozen young blackguards scattered and collected, with long rods and pins. The clock in the school-tower pointed five minutes to nine.

"You brutes!" he cried. A fresh yell of derision answered him.

"A kiss!" screamed the girl, shaking her bright head, as if the door was sawing it off.

Harmen rode round to the gate, which swung to in sudden appeasement behind him. A last yell died away.

"Pay your toll," said the girl, clasping the crackers. She was handsome, with the flare of a startling cigar-card. Milk-white, blue-eyed, a great gold-red aureole.

Her name (self-chosen) was Mia. Her age may have been seventeen; she looked older. Cousin Deborah, who disapproved of everything in her but her cheapness, boldly said she was "a child."

"I didn't promise anything," answered Harmen, dismounting.

"Oh!" exclaimed his deliverer. So he kissed her, sheepishly — a new sensation. Far from disagreeable, but not worth fighting for, as he had seen men do yesterday.

"It's not nice of you," he said severely. "I can't think why you ask it."

"Can't you?" she answered, laughing up into his face. "Shall I tell you? I've often wanted you to kiss me. So I seized my opportunity. Oh, don't flatter yourself *too* much. You're not the first, nor the last!" She banged off the gilt cracker just under his nose. Freckles kicked back as far as the rein would take her. Decidedly, present-day developments were beyond the comprehension of a well-intentioned roan mare.

"If she's seen me, she'll give me the sack," continued Mia. "But she'd never have given me a sack o' these." She cracked a chocolate.

"Surely Aunt Josabet's goodness itself," argued Harmen.

"I don't mean *her*," replied the pert maiden, offering Freckles the empty paper ball. "She gives me goodies, or I wouldn't stay, but nothing as smart as these."

"And Cousin Deborah — what does she give you — slaps?"

"Catch me taking 'em — pills."

"You take those?" Harmen's eyes, while he spoke, sought the chaise.

"She stands by," said the girl with a grin. "Pills don't taste." Yes, the chaise showed in the shed. But he wasn't going to sneak away with it.

"Walk in when you have quite done," said Roel, very politely at the back door. He precipitately disappeared.

"All that noise — was that you?" demanded an imperious voice, like a load of steel rods on pebbles. A cheerful one asked cheerfully, "Anything wrong?"

The shutters were already closed, to ward off the heat. In the half-light Harmen saw across the breakfast table, beside his round old grand-aunt Josabet and her flat old daughter Deborah, the two lovers affectionately proximate.

His mother's aunt was a very aged lady, who had never interfered with anybody, and was, therefore, universally beloved. Her cheek was pink, her laugh was young, her age was eighty-nine. She had risen in life, as her poor niece Jennie had sunk. She thought everybody ought to do the best they could for themselves, if they couldn't do better. Her numerous children either doted on her or were dead and forgotten. The youngest, Deborah, by a common freak of nature

showed most resemblance to a father, who had worried himself into an early grave, said the widow, "by trying to benefit others against their will." Deborah (called by her relatives Debōrah, but why?) was a thin, grey woman at sixty, worn out by knowing better than anybody what everybody ought to do and why. These good creatures had eagerly made temporary room for the turtle-doves, Aunt Josabet because "she had always adored the romantics," Cousin Deborah, because "there were nine hundred and ninety-nine bits of advice she could impart to that poor innocent Carlina."

"Look at them! Don't they look happy?" squeaked fat Aunt Josabet, enjoying her tea, and the (Pols) family scandal, and her grand-nephew's angry stare and the sweet simper of the bride.

Undeniably the latter looked happy. Conquest was in her mien; achievement shone in her eye. Her appearance might be absurd, but there is a softening in unlimited joy. As for the bridegroom, he sat inwardly d—g Deborah's "Hygienic Tea."

He glanced up with a perfunctory grin. His eyes met Harmen's; the grin died away.

"Good gracious, what's amiss?" he exclaimed. "Anybody dead?"

"Yes," said Harmen; for half a second he fiercely enjoyed the women's solicitude. "Long Katrine's dead. Half your cow."

"I don't wonder," replied Roel, coolly. "Only yesterday I advised your father to leave her out in the fields."

"I always said," put in Deborah, rattling the tea-cups, "that Pols could know nothing about up-to-date farming. A dozen times I have advised him to send Harmen—"

A loud report behind the bride caused the whole party

to jump. Carlina flung her arms round her young husband's neck and screamed —

“ Save me, Roel! ”

“ Yes, yes,” he said, firmly disengaging himself.
“ Yes, my pet! ”

Deborah had seized on the cheeky dumpling-cheeked maid.

“ Where did you get this? ” she cried, crumpling the exploded cracker. The girl, whimpering and laughing, fought for the hidden sweet. Aunt Josabett, shaking in her chair, explained to every one, that she and her brothers had delighted in startling people; the bride put three fingers to her fluttering heart.

“ I disagree utterly with old Pols,” continued Roel boldly lighting — Deborah coughed — a cigar. “ Those two other cows he says are ill. They'd be much better in the fields.”

“ Of course they would,” said Deborah, clinging to the ball of gilt paper. “ Fresh air, as I said when the curtain caught fire — ”

“ I suppose you know better than the vet.? ” demanded Harmen, his broad back against the door.

“ Of course,” answered both of them immediately. But Roel smiled.

“ I suppose you'd put the bull in the fields, too? ” asked Harmen, addressing his new uncle and vainly struggling to look unconcerned.

“ Poison! ” cried Deborah, throwing the bon-bon into the slop-basin. The despoiled “ child ” set up a squeal of sorrow, tempered by temper; the old lady quickly handed her a spoonful of sugar from the tray; the child promptly spilled half of the white powder, while Carlina was heard explaining, in her shrill accents, that she should smack a girl like that.

"Smacking isn't good for children," retorted Deborah. "I always advise my friends—"

"Here, you—come outside. I want to speak to you," threatened Harmen.

"Did you mean me?" asked Roel, innocently. "Oh, I thought you meant the girl." He leant back in his chair. "It's too hot outside. I've no secrets from the wife of my bosom. Have I, dearest?" He blew a whiff of smoke towards the impending lady. She sank away from him, wreathed in coughings and smiles.

"I've come to fetch father's chaise," said Harmen.

"Is that all?" cried the other, relieved. "It's in the shed, boy. What a fuss about nothing! You'd make a good play-actor, man!"

Harmen had never seen a play-actor. "Man or boy," he said darkly, "you can fool me no longer. I'm in earnest."

"I was not aware I had fooled you before," carelessly retorted the older man. "Ask your aunt for some breakfast, and then drive the chaise home."

"The butter's delicious, Harmen," put in old Josabet.

"Really better than Cousin Jennie's," said Deborah. "I want you to advise your mother—"

"You are a blackguard, Roel Slink, to insult an old man," continued Harmen. "That is all I had to tell you. An old man you had wronged."

"Wronged?" shrieked Carlina. "Who's wronged. Who? Worked for him! Slaved for him! Wronged!"

"I don't like Steven Pols," said Roel Slink, facing his antagonist across the broad table. "P'raps you do; there's no accounting for tastes. He's been brutal to me these last weeks. It was touch and go." He gripped

with a shapely hand his consort's bony arm; she squeaked. "Hoped the Lord'd kill me, I suppose, if he prayed hard enough. Well, He hasn't: I'm even with him now."

"Leave the Lord out of it," said Harmen.

"A whipper-snapper that I've given many a beating!" fumed the spinster of yesterday.

"No," quickly interrupted Harmen. "Got many a beating, if you please. Father never allowed you to touch me, however much you'd have liked!"

"Harmen, dear, your tea will be cold!" suggested the smiling grand-aunt. "There's nothing so nasty, excepting bad temper, as cold tea."

"And so poisonous," added the daughter, not referring to the temper. "But, there, let him poison his inside, if he choose."

"But not mine," persisted old Josabet. "My inside's all comfortable, and at my age I must *keep* it comfortable. Harmen, tear the leaf from the Comic Calendar and read us to-day's jokes!"

Harmen didn't comply.

"A cross look sits so ill on a nice face," said the grand-aunt. She leant back, pink and white, in the great green cushions of her chair. Her daughter, with the airs of one who commits a meritorious action, poured the tea into her over-filled slop-basin. The little maid had placed the sugar-bowl on the sideboard, and was cautiously inserting a sucked forefinger in its contents.

In the momentary lull Roel said, "I've no grudge against you. Quite the contrary." Harmen winced. "You gave me some excellent advice."

"Oh, hit out at me, if you like," said Harmen.

"What nonsense! Why, if I can help you, I will."

"Without prejudice to ourselves," put in Carlina.

Her husband gazed slowly round at her. "My dearest," he said, "you will have to get used to the idea that I am not an utter idiot, though I did marry you."

"I don't need your help," said Harmen, while Carlina sat pondering.

"Don't you think that. We all need each other, as Aunt Josabett says," the old lady nodded, pleased.

"No aunt of yours," murmured Deborah, who found an up-to-date mental family register a sure opportunity for constantly setting everybody right.

"Why, how short a time it is ago that even I needed you!" smiled Roel. "How about the money now? Your aunt's money? You've heard about that?"

"Only yesterday," replied Harmen, straight out, like a blow. "You never mentioned it before."

"It wasn't mine to mention. But now I speak of it. Oh, I've no secrets. I'm all above-board." He turned to his hostesses, who hadn't stirred. "Don't move," he said.

"Certainly not." Deborah vigorously rinsed a tea-cup. "Both you and Harmen seem to need my advice."

The old lady sat pushing bread-crumbs towards an unwilling fly.

"Everybody ought to have as much money as they want," she said. "I have always wondered why Government doesn't coin more."

"Some have got more than they want," argued Roel. "Harmen'll have to apply to those."

"I'd have to need money a lot worse than you, before I'd do what you've done for it," retorted Harmen. Then he repented. "Don't make me say things I'd rather not say. It's your business, not mine, if you and aunt want to marry. Don't think I'm angry about that. Or that I want to keep aunt's money. A young fellow

can get on without money. But you'll stop insulting my old father, or d—— it —”

“Oh!” screamed Deborah.

“I'll smash your pretty face. Good-bye to all.” He placed his hand on the door-knob.

“Wait!” said Roel. “Don't swear at me; I've worn the Queen's uniform. You do need money—a lot worse than I ever did. Let me give you my little bit of advice.”

“Fresh air is wholesome, *not draughts!*” remarked Cousin Deborah.

Harmen meekly—no, not meekly—closed the door.

“Do you happen to know a person called Govert Blass?” questioned Roel.

“The corn-factor that comes driving past every evening,” eagerly explained Carlina. “The man what always takes his letters to the post in the village—his business letters! The rich Transvaaler that lives out at Lievendaal!”

Her husband turned and tapped her on the cheek. It was a playful tap, but it left a red mark. She put up her hand.

“You know Govert Blass—or about Govert Blass!” he said, fixing his bold gaze on Harmen's unflinching eyes. “He's got plenty. I don't want to make trouble, as long as I get the little I've—earned. You go and ask Blass about a mortgage.”

“Supposing the farm's mortgaged already?” cried Carlina triumphantly.

He flashed out at her. “D—— you” (she hadn't worn the Queen's uniform), “you swore that it wasn't!”

“Really, really!” objected Deborah, rattling her spoons very loud.

Old Josabett laughed.

“It can't be. Of course it isn't!” exclaimed Harmen.

"Though I don't know a thing about father's money affairs."

"Rather a pity — eh — for you?" sweetly suggested the suddenly soured Roel. He scowled at his self-satisfied consort. "Perhaps you wouldn't have been so anxious — but there, we won't mention it! There *can't* be a mortgage, or Carlina'd have known of it. She'd have had to give her consent."

"There *can't* be a mortgage. Father'd have told me," echoed young Pols.

"How old are you, Harmen?" demanded Deborah (sixty) with fine disapproval.

Aunt Josabet said in an undertone: "Play, while you can!"

"Govert Blass," began Carlina, gathering courage, "is the man whom your mother—" Roel swept his arm round and struck her on the mouth: doubtless he only intended to shut it, but the blow toppled her backwards, she began to cry.

With a spring Harmen was upon his fellow-male. He shook him by the shoulders, and flung him on to a sofa. "Don't you hit her again!" he gasped, with heaving chest. Carlina and Deborah screamed. "Let 'em alone!" said the old lady, in her high chair. "I like to see men — men!"

The quondam corporal rose from the couch. "If you want to fight," he said, "this isn't the place. Don't be an idiot, Harmen. You're a thorough good fellow, and I should be awfully sorry to put a bullet through you." He drew a toy-revolver from his pocket and laughingly slipped it back. Carlina's small eyes dilated with terrified admiration. Deborah promptly shifted the spirit-lamp, from some vague mental association with gun-powder. "My dear boy, the only man who ever — half hit me, except you, was this very Govert Blass,"

continued Roel. "When I was first at the farm, and knew nothing about anything, I went into your village tavern at Kothen one evening and talked. I didn't talk amiably about old Steven, I admit. And I said that to stand this tantrums like she does, your good mother must be a bit of a fool. I didn't mean anything. There was a man sitting by himself in a dark corner, and as soon as I uttered the word 'fool,' up he starts to go out and he knocks up against me: 'Don't you talk about a woman in a public-house, you cad,' he says — yes, 'you cad,' he says: I'm above-board, I am — 'you cad,' he says, quite low between him and me, and he hustles out."

"Well?" replied Deborah.

Roel shrugged his shoulders. "He was right enough, I daresay. Only — it's unusual. The man was Govert Blass. He often looks in for a quiet glass, when he takes down the post."

"He takes it down every night at the same hour. It's his business letters. They say he's quite rich. He lives a long way out," cackled Carlina. An absurd little grey and black tuft bobbed about on her head.

"Is that all you have to say to me?" asked Harmen, adjusting his tie.

"Yes. Take my advice and consult the only rich man in the neighbourhood. At any rate he's a man that thinks decent. Remind him of the little incident with my love. I say, where's your pin?"

"I'll send you the fragments." Harmen walked out.

"Who is Blass? What's it all about?" Deborah cheerfully arranged her tea-tray. "Is there a story? I never heard the name before."

"I know nothing more than I told. Nor does Carlina," said Roel.

"I was only going to say," protested the tearful

Carlina, "that we set the clock, at Eben-Haëzar, by his coming past."

"I wanted to tell that bit myself," Roel apologized. "You must never interrupt my stories, sweet. I didn't mean to hurt you."

"I believe there is a mortgage, but I'm not sure," insisted Carlina. "I've heard 'em talking."

"Trust you to pry. I never pry," remarked Deborah.

"If there is a mortgage," said Roel, eyeing the wife of his bosom, "if there is, and you said there wasn't—" He stopped.

"Well?" fluttered Carlina. "You'd have married me — for love only. For love!"

Aunt Josabéth sat smiling to herself. "How about my Comic Calendar? To-day is the fourth."

Roel tore off the leaf, with a r — r — rish! "The usual rubbish about marriage," he said.

CHAPTER VI

THE old man, Steven, had turned back into the house.

"Let me alone," he said, "I'll go to my work in half an hour."

Through a trap-door, with a dozen ladder-like steps, he tottered down into the cellar. She noticed that he stumbled strangely, as he went. But she always looked away, when he moved towards the cellar, since the time he had turned furiously and bade her not to spy on him. He seldom flew out at her: as a rule, he lived calmly, even courteously for a peasant, by her side.

There was a locked wooden door inside the cellar; she had never known what hid behind. The old man with a flaring candle, in the chill underground dark, made straight for this door. He unfastened it and revealed a hole bricked into the earth, and containing a small safe. His shaky fingers played about a copper disc in the centre of the safe-door: he turned the thing forwards and backwards; the door did not budge. He steadied his fingers with an effort, and tried again carefully. Tried, with a strain.

The lock was one of those, in which various letters must be grouped to a word, before it unfastens. The word selected by Steven Pols was known to no other creature on earth.

He tried again with the patience of desperation. No one knew of the existence of this cupboard, but he. His hand was steadier now: he turned the arrow on the disc to each tiny letter, consecutively, under the uncertain

light of the yellow dip. Surely he had got them right this time: he was ready: the door would open! It clung firm.

With a gasp he began again. And, then, suddenly, he realized what was amiss. His fingers trembled, but that wasn't the worst. Some general discomfiture must have befallen him, whilst he lay, through the still hours of the night, face to face with his debt. In rising he had felt wretched and giddy: there was nothing extraordinary, as things had gone of late, in that. But now he learnt that his eye-sight had somehow suffered. He went wrong in distinguishing the little letters. No wonder the door didn't move!

Was that a C or a G? He strained forward, and peered with vain shiftings of the insufficient flame. Was this a B or an R? He put down the candle-stick on the damp, dark-tiled floor. His secret was useless, or no longer his.

He had always been self-centred and silent. A nature that lived alone. Afraid of his own passionate outbursts, and their risk of self-betrayal and of sin, he had schooled himself to reticence as a lad. It is a platitude nowadays that men are the product of heredity and environment. As a boy, Steven Pols had rashly accused a farm-hand of dishonesty; the man's innocence had become manifest too late. The incident, ethically utilized, for more than it was worth, by a sin-seeking parent, had influenced his whole later development. He was equally suspicious of all men and afraid of his suspicions. He had no one to confide in, for he dared not confide in himself.

Once, years ago, he had sealed the secret word in an envelope for Harmen, "to be opened after my death," but the envelope, locked into his bureau, had left him no rest day or night. He tore it up again. He would

tell his son, in dying, when he felt he was dying, when the doctor said he was almost dead.

Now he stood before his safe, and no one could open it. He waited till the mist should clear away from him. He sat down heavily on a box, half full of apples. How long he sat there he couldn't have told. He had blown out the candle.

When he tried again, with throbbing heart, the result was no better.

And at once he told himself, with the ready gloom of his race, that the thing was irrevocable. For months he had felt it coming on, unwilling to acquiesce. His sight had been failing; there had been throbings at his temples, noises in his ears, numb fingers and cold feet; an impeded circulation. Under the nervous strain of the last weeks, the nervous shock of the preceding evening, some weak point must have given way. His own father had died of successive small strokes, long a lamentable spectacle. That had begun with a queer mist in the eyes, a queer tremor in the limbs. They had laughed at the old man's first fears.

Now he, Steven Pols, an old man also, hung against the moist wall, in the darkness, with *his* fears. There was no hurry. He must have patience. To-morrow, a week hence, he would try again. In his peasant life he knew nothing of temporary disorders of vision, caused by kidney or liver-trouble; besides, he had long felt this disaster in the air. No matter; he must have patience, must wait. He made up his mind that, whatever happened, he would come back to-morrow, every day, for a week. He lighted the candle again, to find his way upstairs. Yet once more he must try, one last time. He moved among the pots and boxes, in the smell of salt provisions and fruit.

And, as he cautiously examined the little disc, en-

deavouring to fix his letters, his eagerness discovered a scratch; he felt certain he had never seen it before.

What did a little scratch matter? he angrily asked himself. Probably there were more scratches. This one had doubtless been there a long time. He had never looked for it.

Neither had he looked for it to-day, yet he had observed it. He had observed it, because someone had newly made it. Some one had been there, trying the door.

His fate was upon him, whilst he still believed himself free. It held him by the heart, as it were, and shook him in its hold. A moment ago he had been willing to wait; he could not wait a moment longer. He must know; he must know at once.

He rushed to the steep stairs, as a boat dips; he hesitated. Then, with a complete surrender of his life-long individuality, he called: "Wife!" The dog, Poker, put in his head, barking. "Oh, drive back the dog!" he screamed.

Jennie came down the steps. "How now, were you watching?" he said, with a frightened look.

"No. I was anxious," she said. "Dinner-time's past. You've been here for hours."

"Is Harmen back?"

"No," she said uneasily, "I wish he was."

"He'll have stayed with Aunt Josabett."

"Not likely, with all that work waiting."

"Jennie, look here, I must confide in you. I can't help myself. I'd much rather not."

"I know," she said.

"Know? What do you know? What?"

"Only that you would rather not confide in me. I — you — we have never confided in one another." She spoke with a passionless, almost a satisfied regret.

"Is that all?" he replied, in a great gulp of relief.

"No, look here, I mean this. See, there's this door—eh, you didn't know about it?" He lifted the candle to her face.

"No, I didn't."

"Somebody's been meddling with it!"

"Now, how could they?" she said, soothing him.

"Can I tell? There's a scratch on the lock. Who's made it? Somebody that could unlock the wooden door."

"Steven, the thing is impossible," she argued, as with a child.

"Why impossible? Nothing evil's impossible!" His voice, low all along, dropped to a whisper. "Carlina?"

"She couldn't and she wouldn't," said the Vrouw with decision.

A louder whisper: "Roel?"

"He never came down here. They would have had to steal the key." She had knelt, whilst speaking.

"The scratch isn't a fresh one," she said.

"How? Not a fresh one? Have you seen the lock before?"

"Not I. But the scratch has been there some time." She rose. "Come upstairs."

"You want to put me off the scent. You are in somebody's confidence!"

"Not even in yours, as we said." She spoke with a weary dignity. "You are right, Steven. Nor are you in mine."

"What are you saying? What do these strange words mean?"

"Strange words? I am speaking them at last. After last night it surely isn't unreasonable I should speak them."

He stared, standing with the candle, half afraid.

"Come, let us go to our dinner. Close that door,

Steven. Don't confide in me. I am sure it isn't necessary."

"Sure?" he murmured to himself and to her. "Sure? Sure?" He stumbled in his haste over a sack of potatoes. "Quick!" he said tremulously. "Help me! Quick! The uncertainty's killing me. It's been killing me this last half-hour. I must see it at once! Must make sure!"

"What am I to do?" Her accents were as troubled as his.

"The 'Z,'" he said, pointing and quivering. "Find it! You see, all the letters of the alphabet are there in a circle—quite small! You see them! Find the 'Z.' Point the arrow to it—exactly accurately. Is it done?"

"Yes," she answered, kneeling and turning.

"Now the 'O,' in the same way. Have you got it—the 'O'?"

"Yes," she made answer.

"Yours are young eyes—ah! Point it precisely. Is it done? Now the 'E.' Now the 'N.'"

"It is done," she said.

He placed a swift hand on the brass knob: he felt the door move. "And now go and dish up your dinner," he commanded or entreated, vainly endeavouring to appear unconcerned. It was she who appeared unconcerned, without endeavour.

Before she was well on the stairs, he had pulled the door ajar; the instant her head vanished, he flung the safe open. Its contents lay undisturbed. He dragged the few bundles to the candle; he sank on the floor beside them; he counted the papers eagerly. The papers were banknotes.

He struck his eyes in his anger. "She knows half the secret," he said. "Fool, with thy groundless suspicions! The money is there."

CHAPTER VII

HE sat down before the steaming bowl, with unwashed hands.

"It's all right," he said. "I was stupid. I'm sorry to have made you wait."

She ladled out the savoury mess in silence.

"Why don't you eat?" he said, his mouth full. "It's good enough, though we are so late. But there's few can cook like you."

"I'm not hungry," she said.

"That's just when you ought to eat, or you'll get into the habit."

"You're so strong," she said.

"Yes," he assented, cut to the quick by her not inquiring about his eyes, forgetful that he had always scorned inquiry about ailments of any kind. "Never had an ache or pain in my life. And never missed a meal."

She made no reply.

"You were always a weak body," he continued, "and a poor eater. But nobody can say you didn't do your work just the same. You won't miss Carlina much. She was often just a hindrance."

"I shall get a maid if we stay," she said.

He bent over his plate. "If we stay?" he said. "Oh yes, if we stay." Evidently he expected her to continue; however, he was disappointed.

"Jennie, I've always been good to you?" he resumed, pushing aside his plate.

"Surely," she answered too rapidly. "What makes you ask that to-day?" She also pushed back her empty plate, mechanically.

"Why to-day?" he asked, searching. "To-day's the first day that seems different. So much happened yesterday."

"Let's forget," she said nervously.

"No, that's just it. I feel that — change is coming. I've never been weak, nor had trouble. There's trouble coming. And I shan't be so strong."

"Don't make trouble, then," she said, outwardly calm.

"Bodily trouble, I mean, which is the worst trouble."

"Ah!" she cried. "This secret, now you don't mind? Husbands and wives can have secrets and be happy — eh?" His eyes almost closed in their set stare.

"Husbands and wives can have secrets," she said. Her lips dropped; she plucked at the coarse white cloth.

"Leave me mine, then; it's harmless."

"Steven, I didn't say anything."

"I know. I've always been a good man to you. And you've — always been a good wife."

"Harmen hasn't come back," she replied. "It's already two o'clock."

"I must be stirring. This morning I felt wretched; the dinner has set me up."

The wife rose, as if glad to escape. Already all the long morning she had worked hard, putting things to rights. Except the flowers she had not the heart to injure, few vestiges now remained of the overworn festivities. She returned with anxiety to the housework she executed so nimbly, as if anxious to exhaust in physical labour the mental activity she could not otherwise subdue. The afternoon was a long and a very hot one; she brought Steven, resting a few moments in the barn, his belated cup of tea.

"So she's dead," he said, of course meaning Long Katrine.

"It is a pity," answered the Vrouw. "But that makes one less to milk this overcrowded day."

He lifted his eyes to her over the cup when he had finished.

"That's like you," he said. "Seeing the bright side of things that haven't got any. 'Tisn't my way. 'Tis just a trick."

"Some people couldn't live," she answered meditatively, "if they didn't see the bright side when there isn't one to see." She lingered.

"Is there anything?" he asked.

"Steven, why didn't the boy take his coffee this morning?" she burst out. She held the empty cup in her hand.

"Because he didn't want it," replied the man, taking up a pail. "Yes, the cow's dead. More misfortune. You and I'll have to search our hearts before the Lord."

"But why didn't he want it? Why hasn't he been back for bit nor sup all day? 'Tis the first time he's missed a meal that we didn't know."

The old man paused, with his two gleaming pails, in the sheltered heat of the barn, the warm, grey, sunless light.

"Steven, why did he look at you and then draw back his hand?" She spoke with the fevered insistence which, in a woman, commands reply. "You had been angry with him!"—she bent forward; the cup rattled. "What had you done? What had you said?"

He drew back before the silent helpmeet, suddenly become his judge. It was true that he had always been kind to her; his were olden ideas, Jewish ideas, of the handmaid whose eyes are upon the lips of her lord.

"I was angry with him: I did good to be angry," he said, pressed.

"I was sure of it!" she exclaimed, almost in triumph.

"You have reproached him with this marriage! You have bidden him get you money. He is gone."

"Did he tell you?" cried Pols, letting go one pail. "How else could you guess?"

"No. Aren't I his mother?"

"You guessed? You guessed?"

"Mothers don't guess. Guessings are often wrong."

"He taunted me," said the farmer. "He's ruined me. It was he put Roel up to this plan."

"Ruined *you*? You're an old man. It's worse for him," she cried, enraged.

He looked at her. "It's worst for me," he said. "It's my father's place. I'm Steven Pols." A great silence fell between them, a heavy, horrible silence. She broke it by sheer force.

"Why didn't you stop the marriage?" she said wildly. "Or make some arrangements? You had three weeks."

"I didn't think it would come off," he answered, with real humiliation. "I reasoned with her: I threatened her: I thought she'd repent on the morning of the day. She — she sometimes said she would. She must have been laughing at me. That's bitter — Carlina!" He struck his palm with his fist.

"If the money's hers, she should have had it, as Harmen said," declared the Vrouw.

"Money? There isn't any. I told Roel there wasn't any. He said he believed me. The day before. The cunning rogue. Said he loved her. 'Tis the Lord's doing, not theirs. He's punishing us for our crimes."

"What crimes?" she asked quickly.

"I don't know; do you?" Without looking at her, he took up his pail.

"Harmen's a proud boy," she reasoned. "He won't come back empty-handed. Steven" — she paused; her own daring caught her breath — "Steven, what have you

got in that cupboard down in the cellar that you were so frightened about?"

"Woman!" he cried: his grey eyes flamed. Had he been of the men who strike, he would have struck her.

"Steven, we've never quarrelled; don't please let's quarrel now! I've always done as you bid me, but I disobey you now. The boy! I've my right, all my right, to the boy."

"Have you more right than I?"

For a moment she sought an answer; then she said, "I've a right — I've a right to the boy. Don't ask me to give him up, the least bit, not for a day; I won't do it. He must come back; he must come back at once. Where is he? What's he looking for? How much did you say? To whom can he fly? Only yesterday he was talking about wanting to go to Overstad, wanting to be a soldier! He shan't enlist — perhaps for the Colonies! He wouldn't take his coffee. Fancy his not taking his coffee, because you were watching him — oh, I felt you behind me! What irreparable thing have you done to him? You must send after him, go after him! You — *you* must fetch him back!"

"You've gone crazy," said Steven Pols. "I run after him? He'll come back to supper. Suddenly gone crazy after near on five-and-twenty years!" The words sounded cruel, but not the voice.

"Suddenly crazy, if you will," she said. "I am crazy, if you will, about the boy. He's all. He's everything. Our life has been what it has. One can't change life. I've got the boy. Oh, don't let's begin to quarrel about the boy!"

"You talk as if I was nothing," said old Stephen. "As if the boy was nothing to me! As if he wasn't mine!"

"Oh, don't!" she said, putting back the smooth hair from her brow.

"It's wicked to complain of life — like complaining of the Lord! What's been wrong with our lives? It's not like you to complain."

"Ah!" she said. "Nor like you. Is it chance that just this day you have told me your secret?"

"I couldn't help myself. But I haven't told you any secret." Her heart leaped, to see the fierce working of his thin lips.

"You have told me how to open your strong box," she said stoutly.

"You couldn't do it!" — the sounds broke forth, as through a screen. "You don't know the word!"

Again she recoiled, then her love and her fear, swept her on. "I know it," she said. "It spelt z—o—e—n."

He stood trying to steady his long legs, that seemed to slip away under him. He caught at a wooden bench.

"Don't let's beat about the bush," he said, his eyes on the brick floor. "What do you mean to do?"

"Go to him, Steven! Find him! Bring him back!" She joined her hands.

"I would go to the poorhouse myself first, and let him be master here!"

She grew suddenly chill as marble; her voice was white and hard.

"The poorhouse!" she echoed, with novel scorn. "There is gold, I am sure of it, in your cupboard. I have always suspected it. When you went down there and made us save and save all these years, and we so poor! I have never spoken, but I've felt, I've known. Haven't I worked, and saved — and never bought things, like other women? You've driven the boy out, and there's money downstairs."

"You reproach me?" he said, faltering with indignation.

"Have I ever done so before?"

"You — you'd steal it?" He rose, reeling.

"You see, it is there! No; I shall tell the boy you've got it. He shan't break his young heart about such a small thing as money. Your farm of the Polses needn't be sold unless you wish."

She turned to the barn-door; he flung himself, or fell, against it. The door swung open; the summer-light poured in. "It isn't mine," he implored. "At least not to spend!"

"Isn't yours?" All her strength dissolved in pity.

"Not to spend as I like. Not — not yet, at any rate. I don't know if it is mine. Give me time."

"Tell me now. Tell me why we are ruined, if you have money? Why you have driven Harmen out in this manner to look for more?"

He stood, black, in the silver-grey sunbeams. "I will tell you," he said slowly. "Yes, if you have no secrets from me, I will have none. Yes, if so, I can quite easily tell you. Quite easily. Say you have no secrets from me — say that only — no secret that matters. The thing will be quite simple. We will have no secrets. We can be happy, Jennie. Only say you have no secret from me."

She tried to speak and failed, tried twice. Then she spoke with the quiet sadness of a sigh in a child's sleep —

"Yes, I have my secret. It is mine; it doesn't matter to you, or to any one. It — it is of no importance. But I shall never speak of it to living soul — not on earth."

He stood watching her in silence. She made as if to drop her poor face in her hands, but she conquered the desire and calmly held her eyes straight, neither lifting nor loosing them. He stumbled to get the pails, and went out.

CHAPTER VIII

THE Vrouw also returned to the work that was calling her. More than she could get through unaided. She had never been afraid of labour, late and early, in the thankless struggle of a modern farm. Her touch was neat, her glance assured. She left behind her the agreeable sense that she had passed. That is highest praise for a farm-wife, cumbered by the constant increase of dirt. It was the praise of her husband, who saw specks where they were not. Both had laboured, through their monotonous life-day, putting their hands to the plough and to the pail.

The peasant-blood was in her veins also, or she never could have done it. A woman may achieve perhaps every coveted social change but this; she must be born to farm-work. It would have been useless to tell Eve, bred in a garden, that henceforth she should till the soil. If she tried to make cheeses, they were certainly uneatable; Abel's wife was the first who could do that.

She — that is to say Jaantje — must have been at least twelve years old when her parents exchanged the country, on the farther side of Overstad, for the city, and Jaantje became Jennie. The father, a small farmer and inn-keeper, failed. Before his downfall he drank much; after it more. The blight of that slow tragedy had eaten its way into her young heart and discoloured its world. There had remained a horror of sordid dearth, with its daily shifts and tricks. The open country, full of sunlight and air and wholesome scents, had become a vision of lost delight to the girl in the mean back street. From

that street she had escaped, barely sixteen, to a town-house, dark and dull-toned, but at least roomy, with spare spaces and a tiny garden. There she had seen, and almost too readily assimilated, some of the refinements of a more cultivated existence. The paintress, her first mistress, charmed by the little maid's sparkle of swift perception, took pleasure in pointing out unrealized beauties of sight and sound. On free evenings the down-trodden mother noticed, with a sneer, some small trinket, a bunch of flowers, a smart bow. "La, you're quite the lady," said the mother, who, disheartened, had also taken to drink. A couple of brothers went more or less wrong. The girl had to help these.

She had spent three or four years in domestic service, when fate took her one summer out into the country, with her second mistress, for a few weeks amongst the haycocks and the cattle. Before that the holidays had meant the seaside; she loathed the noisy sea. The country seemed all that her memory had fancied. On her return she informed her mistress that she intended to marry the small farmer to whom she had daily taken the children for their drink of fresh milk.

The lady, unwilling to lose an admirable servant, objected insufficient acquaintance, discrepancy of culture, difference of age. But Jennie at once scented the egotistical motive; she had no faith in this woman, as she had in her former guide. "Enchanting!" said the artist, when consulted. "Exquisite. All the poetry of the fields!" Jennie reasonably answered that she loved the country, and might never have another offer. She had no home to go to. She married Steven Pols.

As for their married life, Jennie, now sitting at the milking that had largely been Carlina's share, reflected how opposite her husband's description of it had been. He had been good to her. Yes, considering how pas-

sionate he was by nature, he had proved wonderfully good to her. When they married, he had owned that he was passionate. "The Lord helps, but I'm passionate," he had said. "I am not," had been her only reply.

And surely she had done her duty by the farm. She had been a serviceable and subservient helpmeet. And the sister-in-law in the household had proved an ever-prominent trial. Carlina was capricious: Jennie, though sweet-tempered, wasn't meek. At first the wife had endeavoured to reason with a quite unreasonable opponent; then, in her calm common sense, she had given that up, had awaited a dismissal by the husband, which never came. Violent dissensions had occurred once or twice, but only because Jennie caught fire, and flamed back over the boy. It was true, as Harmen had said, that Carlina had never dared to strike him, but any other form of insult came easy in her mind. At a word of complaint from the boy, his mother turned white and red. Steven had to intervene; he was unjust then to her in her long endurance. She had never understood why he, so autocratic, seemed cowed by his sister, ever anxious to appease the termagant. Now, all too late, when the wife's resentment had hardened, the husband had explained his conduct. She felt what the strain must have been to his nature. She could have borne her cross better had she known why he left it on her shoulders. It was twenty years since she had once mildly suggested Carlina's leaving them. He had answered — can a woman forget such things? — "Sooner you than she!"

This very month next year would see their Silver Wedding. Twenty-five years of married felicity — a quarter of a century — a lifetime; the lifetime that we never live again.

Why, no; they might spend twenty long years more

together. Twenty brief years. What does it matter? Some women have two lives, even three. And in some existences fifty years are less than twenty-five.

She rose heavily, and went to get the new calf a little milk. It bleded. When it grew older, it would chew the cud in silence.

The weather was magnificent. The hay-crop would be one to remember. But when there was so much hay, prices fell. The world is a worrying world at best. She moved, calculating the prices and profits of the hay-crop.

The best thing that could happen to any one was that simultaneously the English market for pork should go up, and the American market for maize should go down. It was a strange happiness to aspire to. Some people could even pray for it. As for her, she had never been able to rise higher than possible good fairies — elves, such as her first mistress was always painting, such as the old shepherd had loved to tell about. Even these seemed very doubtful; as a rule the maize went up with the pork.

She went the round of her animals, feeding them with perfunctory care. They missed her usual conversation. The shadows were lengthening; Harmen had not returned. When the heat was so extravagant, a thunder-storm would follow, and possibly no less exaggerated cold. Thunderstorms frequently killed cows. But Long Katrine had been killed in another way by nature. The farm-wife went into the house to feed her men.

When supper was ready, she called to her husband. He came slowly through the mellow golden air. He brought with him a sweet odour of grass. At the door he kicked off his wooden shoes.

“It’s no use waiting,” she said.

He sat down in silence and ate. It was already

late, as the hours counted with them. At this time of the year they mostly went to rest before the sun did, and rose at four in the morning, even three.

"So you never thought she'd do it?" said the Vrouw, to break the silence.

"Never. Only the night before, she said I was right, and nodded and smiled."

"When a woman says she won't, Steven, and smiles and nods, she mostly means that she will."

"I don't know about women," he said angrily. He filled his plate.

She gazed away pensively, into the radiant heat outside.

"Did you tell her he came for her money?" she asked presently.

"No." He added clumsily. "She said the first day that she knew she was penniless, and I let it stand at that."

She smiled, somewhere internally, for her countenance remained firm. Indeed, why should she hurt him more than he had already hurt himself?

"Women are the devil for cunning," he said violently. "No wonder the serpent in the Bible has got a woman's head."

"We—we fight with the weapons we've got," she made answer, gazing down at her slender, hard-working wrists. "We have often to make believe—what's true."

"Give *me* a straight blow," he said, and walked out, with his pipe. She wondered how he would take the blow, if given.

When she had washed up she lingered, unable to settle to anything. She pushed open the door of the darkened state chamber. She stood in front of all the heaped china the boy had put away for her before he

thought of resting. So like him that, to spare her the trouble. The china was her proudest possession, owned by her mother's mother, specially bequeathed to her. She felt that she would have given it all to end this sudden quarrel about the boy.

The old man came behind her, asking about a cloth he wanted.

"You startled me," she said.

"I couldn't find you," he answered darkly. She understood that he had expected, perhaps hoped, to surprise her in the cellar.

"I can't stand it any longer," he continued.

What couldn't he stand? The boy's prolonged absence? No, nor could she.

"You must swear to me that you'll never open the letter-lock," he said. "You must swear by God in heaven."

"I don't believe in God in heaven," she said. "But I'll swear."

He turned to her, appalled. The great silver-clasped Bible on the polished table gleamed at her. She saw it.

"You have never said anything so awful before!" His voice was hushed.

"I have thought it the more. Oh, well, I'll believe in your God in heaven if only you don't think He's on earth." Her words came sadly; they thrilled her; it was not easy for her to speak then.

"Woman," he said, and he clung to the table, his long face stretched out, "it is you who bring ruin upon us by such horrible thoughts as these. Eben-Haëzar! How could the Almighty bless a house where they don't even believe in His Name?"

"What?" she said, half closing her sorrowful eyes. "Shall Job serve the Lord for nought?"

"Yes, that's what the devil said — the devil! But

God said, 'No, indeed,'— and He gave Job double of everything."

Her nostrils just lifted with the slightest touch of faint scorn.

"Swear," he broke out, "that, whatever happens, you will never, never, tell any one else!" He lifted both fists to his own face.

"That I refuse. I will never swear not to tell Harmen."

He stood away from her. The tears were under his lids. She did not see them, in the dusk. She saw the keen old eyes she knew so well.

"I believe you think I am only a wretched old miser?" he questioned. He waited one moment. "I am not," he said quietly, and crept to the door.

She stole after him.

"Your love for the boy is a sin," he said.

"See how good he is to us. He cleaned all this up for me. And he didn't call you to the stable. His bed wasn't slept in. Up all night, and out all day."

The blame of the closing sentence angered him.

"If he'd called me, I dare say I might have saved Katrine."

She blazed out at him; by a huge effort only she restrained herself. She hurried past, drawing back her skirt, away into the open. She fetched a deep breath. But the air was hot and stifling; the still somnolence of the world oppressed her. The leaves hung motionless, in great black traceries against a primrose sky.

It was late, fearfully, incredibly late, and he hadn't come. She ran to the bridge; she paused, with a hand across her forehead, gazing down the heavily shadowed road. In the far brushwood she again heard the nightingales echoing to one another. Her heart cried out to them to cease their sore turbulence of song.

She was amazed, she was alarmed, at her own fury. Was this she, the wife of Steven Pols, who cried out against honest hardness, against mercenary religion? When the ice breaks at last, does it carry like this?

The night had fallen. She had seen in his eyes, when he refused the cup she held out to him, that he accepted the old man's challenge. He, the son who had never yet for one whole day deserted her, had been driven out, foodless, unrested. "Fetch back the money," Steven had tauntingly said. It was true that Harmen had done all he could to bring — and leave — Roel and Carlina together. That also, perhaps, as much for his mother's sake as his own. They had confided in each other years ago, mother and son. Only last winter he had surprised her, one day, in foolish tears. The possible riddance from Carlina came as a Godsend, too good to be true. Roel had said, "I shouldn't venture." The son of the house had, so to speak, joined their hands.

All this she remembered, with self-reproach. He would never come back without the money. Why should he come back now that — through his fault — they were ruined, come back to hire himself out as some neighbour's farmhand, with the whole world of Overstad, of the barracks, of colonial adventure calling him away? He would never come back.

A sound of swift wheels along the high-road. For a moment her joy leaped out to meet them. Then she knew they were not his. The corn-factor, driving from the village, from Kothen, passed in his usual manner, in his usual cart. He gave her his usual "Good evening!" And she, as was mostly the case when she met him thus on the road, she murmured an inaudible reply. Occasionally, it is true, she had spoken the words plainly, as to any passer-by with whom she had never held per-

sonal intercourse — sometimes audibly, sometimes in a murmur down the throat, and no more.

The corn-factor's bright cart went by in a pleasant glitter of polish and jingle of steel. The corn-factor was a well-to-do man; his conveyance looked well-to-do. She turned after it, disappointed, despairing. "Govert!" she breathed.

The man in the cart flung back his horse, almost upon her haunches, dragged back the light vehicle, swerving and creaking between the poplars, a few swift, struggling paces, by sheer force of compulsion, and drew up in a whirl of stampings and heavings, sideways across the dim line of road.

"You spoke?" he said.

"No," she gasped, truthfully unconscious. He waited a moment, his horse pawing. Then, without another word, he drove on.

CHAPTER IX

HIS mother had read aright the refusal in Harmen's eyes. Whatever happened—and, for the moment, his hopes and fears were gone strangely out of focus—he stood resolved never again, returning with empty hands, to touch food beneath his father's gaze. He felt that, even unmixed with reproaches, a mouthful would choke him. Besides, he knew his father. Sooner or later, the restrained taunt would break forth.

When he came out of Aunt Josabett's parlour, the young man felt but one impulse, to get away! Not to hear Roel's voice, not to hear Carlina's. He went to the shed and began harnessing the roan mare. Freckles liked him, chiefly because old Steven's voice was rough; she nodded, big-eyed, with a pleasing moisture about the mouth.

"You're half Roel's," said Harmen. "If he comes, you might let him have both your hind legs!" But Roel warily stayed away; it was only the slavey who came peeping round the corner.

"I'm sent on an errand," said the capped and print-gowned slavey. "Such goings on. Beef-steak for dinner! She's mad."

"Who is *she*?" queried Harmen, glad of any one to talk to.

The youthful maid lifted her pert nose. "*She* is Deborah. The old lady's never mad. The old lady'd have had a chicken; didn't ye hear Deborah shriek out at her? Fancy! a chicken in June!"

"Poor Aunt Josabett!" said Harmen.

"She ain't to be pitied; she's never felt trouble, no more than a pin-cushion feels pricks. Now, you do look glum. They were rude to you, weren't they? I wouldn't look glum."

"Depends," said Harmen, tightening a strap.

"No, I wouldn't. Not if I was young and strong, and could look handsome." She peaked up her dimpled chin. "Young, strong, handsome — nobody could make me look glum." She skipped round the yard and dropped him a curtsey. "Stupid," she said, "what'll you do when you're old and crabbed?"

"Not be crabbed," he answered, laughing.

"What! not crabbed when you're old, now you're glum when you're young? Yes, you will. I don't care *what* your trouble is. Nobody has trouble at twenty that somebody can't kiss away!"

"I'm not in the kissing line," he said.

"That's why you look glum. Nobody has trouble at twenty that — that anybody can't kiss away!" Again she peaked up her pretty face at him and skipped round the little yard. "D'ye think *my* life's so jolly?" she said, coming back.

"I'm ready," he answered, gathering the reins.

"Ready for what? A little love-making? It'd cheer you up. I say, take me along!"

"Cheeky!" said Harmen, and looked her over.

"My name's Mia. Where are you going?"

"I don't know." He took his foot off the chaise-step.

"Oh, liar!" remarked Mia.

"I mean — of course, I'm going back."

"Well, that's all in my way, you see. It's like this," — the young maid gesticulated — "if you drive me there, I can get to see my poor mother, whilst *she* thinks I've gone to the butcher's on foot."

"How can I drive about the town with you in a thing like this?" objected Harmen. "Poor mother, did you say?"

"Mother's very ill," sighed Mia, squinting at him out of the furthest corners of her eyes.

"What's wrong?" Harmen led the mare round the corner.

"She sneezes!" said the small person, walking and watching beside him. "Small" chiefly in Deborah's mental vision, for the "little" maid's figure was as fine-grown as her intellect. Both might well have belonged to an older, if not to a bolder, wench. "She looks and works like eighteen," answered Deborah, when interrogated why she kept the minx, "and eats and earns like twelve. 'Tis a great thing for her to be under my guidance, in spite of mother's silly ways." Why Mia stayed on? Because of Aunt Josabet's silly ways.

And because Harmen came in on Saturdays with his mother's cheeses. When her smouldering caprice for the young "boor" had burnt itself out, she would probably give notice — or fall in love with Roel.

"Yes, she sneezes," said Miss Mia. "The other day the doctor told her, if she sneezed like that again she might die on the spot." It was quite correct, that Mia's hypochondriacal parent had harassed her "poor-box" doctor into the irritable threat that she would some day burst a blood-vessel, if she couldn't learn to make a less unmannerly noise.

The lucky shot brought down Harmen at once. Of disease he knew nothing, but he always said "God bless you!" when anybody — even an animal — sneezed, because a sneeze, as we all have heard, ever since the Middle Ages, may well become a harbinger of death.

"Get in!" he said solemnly. "It'll look absurd, but

I can't help it. I say, I hope it'll be years before she sneezes like that again!"

"It's fits," said the maiden, installing herself with many an extra jerk. "She just can't leave off. The doctor says she sneezes her brains away. She's plenty left to scold me with, for doing what she did when she was as pretty as me. I like your horse. Is he young or old?"

"Middle-aged," replied Harmen, feeling acutely the merited amazement of the populace, as he crossed the Saturday market in his bridal suit and the gilt, furbished cart, with the basketed maid.

"I don't like middle-aged. I like old or young. Is he a father?"

"No," answered Harmen, blushing — the stupid. "Tell me where I must put you down."

"We're not *nearly* there yet. And you'd better take me back afterwards. I say, what's the trouble? Loss of money? What can you care about loss of money at your age? I haven't got any money. Why don't you enlist?"

"I don't care overmuch about loss of money. But I hate being done. I can't take you back; it's too far for the mare."

"Why, we're there already, the little green house. I was only laughing at you. I won't be a minute." She scrambled down.

Waiting in the street, here and at the butcher's, he at least made up his mind what to do next. He would drive back the mare to the village inn.

Miss Mia came running out triumphant from the butcher's. "I slanged him!" she cried. "What! Rump-steak the same price as fillet! The villain! Whip up your horse."

“Not for you,” replied Harmen.

“H’m! Let her scold. ‘She does that anyhow. I took mother all the things old Josabet gave me. Well, not *all* the sugar. She wouldn’t expect me to. Josabet pitied mother; Josabet never was ill.’”

“She’s my grand-aunt. Speak decent,” said Harmen.

“All right. Madame Josabet. She’s a wise ‘un, she is. She teaches me a lot. That’s why I stop. Now give me a kiss, and I’ll get down.”

“I told you I wasn’t in the kissing line. I say, it’s a bad habit for girls.”

“Well, give me a kiss, and I’ll get down.” Harmen had stopped his steed at the quiet corner.

“Get down!” said Harmen.

“Not till you—why, there’s no harm in it. In reason. Aunt Josabet says, ‘Never kiss another so as to hurt your own lips.’”

“You will some day, if you don’t look out.”

“I don’t think so,” said Miss Mia, smiling sweetly. “There’s Roel peeping round the corner. Now kiss me, like a good chap, and he’ll let me alone.”

Harmen hesitated. He was young: her young face glowed, apple-bright, under its auburn aureole.

“I shan’t get down till you do,” said Mia. “And it’s your Christian duty to your Aunt Carlina, besides.”

“Well, if it’s my Christian duty!” said Harmen.

“That’s right. You did more than your duty,” remarked Mia, jumping off the step. She nodded to Roel’s retreating visage round the corner. “So you can whip him up for yourself!” she squealed after the chaise.

The touch was gentle. Freckles perfectly understood it to mean, “Let’s get away!” and not “Let’s hurry on!”

Back through the heat-hushed fields at a thoughtful

pace. The cattle, lazily turning their heads — some few less asleep than most — watched the chaise along the still canal, beneath the unbending poplars.

At the village inn Harmen stabled his mare. The out-house was a good one, well built, carefully darkened and cool.

“She’ll be as comfortable here as at home,” he remarked to the host, just behind him.

The host smiled; he was a pincushion sort of man in his build, with a red button of a nose. His name was Vulsevol, and he believed the world had been created for him to talk about, and to.

“They’re never as comfortable as at home,” answered Vulsevol. “None of us is. Though I, as a landlord, shouldn’t say it. But I always speaks against myself. You never brought her here before.”

“She’s done enough for to-day,” said Harmen. “I’m going on.”

“That box there’s Mynheer Blass’s,” nodded the landlord. “He had it made on purpose. He likes to put his horse in a box, by himself. Foreign ways. Handsome, eh? English make.”

No amount of mental bother could keep Harmen from examining with keen interest so entrancing a novelty.

“Why, it’s finer than a cupboard-bed!” he ejaculated. “There’s a many that might wish they was a horse.”

“And all the better for the change,” remarked Vulsevol, who fattened on a publican’s scorn of his clientèle. Harmen, too young but too fond of horses to be absolutely positive, agreed.

He asked for some bread and some beer. He could not be called communicative by nature; the landlord’s natural curiosity, however, was largely tempered by the man’s eagerness to hear his own voice. Vulsevol’s mind

was like a public-house bar. He turned a tap, and the troubled stream foamed forth. The only difference was the absence of selection in the twist of the mental screw.

Harmen, as he munched, sat speculating from which of the tables Blass had risen in defence of an unknown woman. He liked the man for it; he wished that he could have thanked him. In his humble view, Mynheer Blass was a person of considerable importance, the wealthiest dweller in a neighbourhood where gentlefolks were scarce. Not a man for a small farmer's son to approach without deference.

"This Mynheer Blass — is he kind-hearted?" asked Harmen.

Baas Vulsevol, who had been babbling on about everything and nothing, leant back against the bar, his short cushion legs apart.

"You don't know him?" he questioned, trying to look shrewd. He always tried, and he always thought he succeeded.

"He passes our place daily. I never spoke to him in my life."

"Nobody knows him. There's no saying. He don't speak." Mine host shifted some glasses. "Nor he don't listen. I can't abide a man that don't listen — nor don't speak." This last was an after-thought. Mine host shifted the glasses back again.

"Now, your father," continued Vulsevol, "he's too silent for me also. I like chatty people, that let you see what's inside them. And never comes near this place, though I for one don't recommend any one to enter a tavern. I told the parson so. 'That isn't in the interest of the publican,' says he. 'No, but it's in the interest of the public,' says I. I had him there." Vulsevol poured himself out a glass of gin. "Yes, I always speaks against myself. I can't help it. It's the profession I was

brought up to, my father's. Have another glass of beer? No? Quite right, too. Beside's, gin's better."

"He comes here often?" Harmen chose another hunk of bread.

"Who — the Dominé? Oh, Blass — he brings his letters to the post-office, whatever the weather; and if the road was bad, he gives his horse a rest. He sits down and has a glass, but he doesn't speak to any one. Unsociable, I calls it. He answers civil. I likes a man as listens." Vulsevol moved the glasses. "Have a go of gin? No? Quite right. Though gin's the thing for hot weather. And for cold. Take my advice. No beer till your work's over. Gin in the day-time. Beer, and plenty of it, at night. I shouldn't have been a landlord, if I hadn't been born to it, like a terrier-pup's born to be a terrier. Preaching'd have been my line. Not that I'd have believed in my preaching any more than I believe in my beer. That wouldn't have mattered, Harmen Pols. Dear, dear, I'm talking too much: my wife'll scold me. But it's so dull till the chaps come round: one's tongue'd get stiff, if one didn't wag it a bit. That box in the stable came from an English firm at Brussels. Blass walks in, and 'I expect a box here to-morrow,' he says, 'that I'll pay you to put up.' 'Boxer?' says I, for naturally that's what I understood him to say, not knowing the foreign word. 'Well, really, I don't like it,' says I. 'I had a wrestler last month, as you know, but boxing I do think a bloody —' 'Hush!' says he, catching me up, which is a thing I hates, and nobody but Mynheer Blass dare do it. Them's his manners, and a rich man can just have the manners he prefers. Non-manners is the manners of the rich." The landlord emptied his glass, smiling at his own wit and his own spirits. Both were old.

"Is it true that he —" Harmen checked himself; he

was going to say, 'lends money?' But you might as well have advertised in the little Kothen *News*.

"What? Goes against our party at the elections?" rattled the landlord, "Yes, it is true. For of course your father votes with the Church. We've a meeting here next week, a man coming from Utrecht to speak against the Liberals and for the Church. I let him have this room for nothing, and the beer the usual price. I hate a fellow that runs down the Church. Every poor man has a right, as the great Romish leader told us, to two goes of gin a day, and the gospel on Sundays. I'm not sure he said 'the gospel,' being a Romanist, but I'm sure he said, the goes of gin."

"I know," said Harmen, wiping his mouth with the broad back of his hand.

"Govert Blass votes with the Liberals. He's against Tariff Reform, he is. A corn-factor, and doesn't believe in corn duties! That's beyond me. A man that cuts off his nose to spite his face!" The publican rubbed his own red button. "Says dear bread's a crime! Well, I'm with him, so far. Cheap bread and dear beer! But a corn-factor!" Suddenly he remembered. "What did you ask?"

"Is it true that he always sits at the same table?" said Harmen, turning the gossip off the scent.

"Certainly it is true," replied the disappointed landlord. "He sits at the table you're sitting at now."

Harmen foolishly started, in that naturally chosen quiet corner. True child of his fancy-loving mother, he accepted the coincidence as some sort of an omen. The stranger who had considered Jennie's honour might possibly render him reasonable assistance. His dubitative mind clinched its argument. He brought down his right fist on the table in front of him.

“ ‘Tis a long drive for the man. Half an hour, I should say,” he remarked, as he rose.

“ Quite that,” concurred the landlord. “ Did you say you were walking home? Will you send for the horse? ”

“ Yes, to-morrow. Take good care of her.”

“ Never fear. Fetch her yourself. I so seldom get a talk with a man that’s worth talking to.”

“ Why, lots of them come in of an evening? ”

“ So they do, of the kind that takes three glasses, like Roel Slink. You took two. That’s the kind I like. Blass takes only one.”

“ It’s so hot,” said Harmen, apologetically.

“ Two’s my number. But gin by day, mind. That’s *my* advice. Queer talk for a publican, eh? But I never should have been a publican, if my father — ”

“ Quite so,” said Harmen, out in the road.

“ A practical politician, now, that would have suited me,” continued Vulsevol, following him. “ Even better than a parson. Who knows? Four years hence, at the next general election — ”

“ I must be going,” put in Harmen. “ Take good care of the horse.” He started walking the untravelled distance to Lievendaal.

CHAPTER X

LIEVENDAAL lies in unwonted loneliness. The Low Countries are so densely packed with human creatures that it is difficult to find a corner reasonably fruitful and not overrun.

For the first mile or so Harmen could follow his familiar canal, under shade. Then he struck off, through unfrequented immensities of meadow-land, with his face to the broiling sun. And the emptiness and the sleepiness imperceptibly strengthened him, as did also the struggle against the heat. Once or twice a white road meandered away to some far distant village or neighbouring homestead. Presently, on the long, glaring line a moving speck blackened into view.

The young peasant pushed aside his cogitations as to what terms he could offer the capitalist, and guessed aright in a moment or so, regarding the nature of the speck. He caught up with a light hand-cart, drawn by a big dog and pushed by a little man, as is the custom of the country — not such a preposterous custom, after all, if the dog be strong, the cart light, and the man behind, not upon, the cart. If!

The man was, as Harmen had foreseen, old Suerus, or "Swearus," well-known in the country-side, a vanishing type. A pedlar, supposed to sell only boots, shoes, and slippers, but willing to bring you anything you had asked for last time. A young man, in reality, with an orange ring-beard and unripe apricot complexion, who had succeeded his uncle, the original "Old Swearus,"

that is to say, "Ahasuerus," thus dubbed by some village schoolmaster, astonished to find no change in the Jew hawker he had known from his youth.

Old Swearus the Second, who had never been young Swearus to any one, least of all to himself, had ill-health, a ready wit, and an ugly but insinuating smile.

"Why, you get as far as this?" exclaimed Harmen.

"I get everywhere," replied Suerus, whose Polish patronymic is quite unrememberable. "But you — do you know your way?"

"Yes," said Harmen, and offered the Jew his last cigar but one. They both wiped their faces. Of course the meeting with this most universal of travellers was disconcerting. The dog barked excitedly, eager to get on.

"He knows we're nearly there," exclaimed Suerus, spouting, "We're bound for Mynheer Blass's — Lievendaal." Thereupon he made a couple of remarks to the dog, as if they were still alone — the two of them — upon the burning road.

"Who is Mynheer Blass?" questioned Harmen. Then, immediately, ashamed of the subterfuge. "I mean, of course, I know who — but what?"

"He's been in foreign parts," answered Suerus.

"What does that prove?"

"It's taught him to be silent, except when he wants to speak."

"Isn't everybody like that?" asked Harmen.

"No, young man. One half of the avoidable wretchedness in this world is caused by people speaking when they want to, and the other half by their speaking when they didn't want."

This philosophy was beyond Harmen, so he repeated, "Avoidable?"

"Yes. The wretchedness of Nature's making isn't

avoidable. Never mind me. He's been in foreign parts."

To have been in foreign parts alarmed Harmen. It was almost as discomposing as being a foreigner. So he said —

"They wasn't so very foreign."

"They was as little foreign as foreign parts could be, considering how very foreign they was," replied the pedlar oracularly. He added with the continuous lisp of his people (which will not be further indicated here). "Thransthvaal."

"I wonder would it be as hot in those parts as here!" said Harmen.

The pedlar stopped for a rest. "Yon's the house," he said, with a jerk of his head. "She likes the dog to come in cool." His helpmate lay panting, with an endless quiver of pink tongue. Harmen's heart gave an uncomfortable little jump; all this was so very unfamiliar to him. He gazed towards a dark mass against foliage with a faint curl of smoke in the pale sky.

"Hot?" said the pedlar, relighting the cigar. "Hot is just what you feel proportionate. You go back into a hot room from a hotter, and you'll see! Hell won't feel hot, unless there's cold compartments. Do you know, when *I* feel hot? When I'm sitting, tidied and shaven, with my collar on, in my Sabbath coat, of Sundays, after meals. If you was a pedlar, you wouldn't feel hot on the open road. It's because you're not accustomed to walking."

"I work hard enough," said Harmen, aggrieved.

"Just so, and don't think to feel hot over it!" answered Suerus. "At least, that's sense. See, you're making me sweat already."

"You sweated before," said Harmen. "Look at the

dog!" The fields were steaming, the sky was brazen; nothing stirred.

"That dog!" proclaimed Swearus, with extended and dropping palm. "You'd think that dog was hot? Not a bit of it. He doesn't know that he sweats."

"Poor chap!" said Harmen, and patted the creature's moist head. The pedlar looked on with approval. "Don't think, and it don't hurt," he argued. "That's what I'm always teaching the dog. My old uncle taught me."

"Was it that helped him to live to ninety something?"

"He was eighty-seven when he died. Why do people always make old folks so much older?" The pedlar addressed a closely attentive cow in a ditch. "Because they fancy it helps towards their own long—eevity." The pedlar smiled at his shrewdness. "But you'll die all the same!" he said, nodding to the cow.

"Up!" He resumed his slow march with the cart, whilst the huffed cow jumped aside. "You think of so many things, when you peddle about along the lonely roads. You can't help becoming a philosopher. That dog is. He doesn't know it. His name's Socrates, but he thinks it's Sock."

"Who's Socrates?" questioned Harmen, examining the house as it approached them, and glad of any diversion.

"I'll bring you some books, if you like," said the pedlar, "to Eben-Haëzar. Cheap ones. Seems to me you need 'em."

"I can't read books," answered Harmen. "Not real ones. I can read the paper, and Aimard, and Sherlock Holmes."

"I'll bring you the latest Holmes," acquiesced the pedlar. They said, Holmess.

"I can't read in summer, I'm too tired," pleaded Harmen, apologetically. "And I don't really care much about crimes and murders that never was done."

The pedlar began to fear that his talk had been wasted.

"We can't get up a real murder to please you," he remarked with slight asperity.

"No, but they come off without that," rang the civil reply. "It *is* exciting, like the one of the headless woman at Overstad. That *was* a good one. But it's horrid to like crimes. I never knew nobody as wanted to commit any." After a pause, he added dutifully, "I'm glad to say."

"Well, this is where I go in," grumbled the pedlar. "You're sure you don't want to improve your mind the least little bit? A love-story now. Some people can get improvement out of a love-story. *I* never can make out what it's about. Not? Pah, I don't believe you can read! Well, thanks for the cigar. Going much further?"

"Are you sure to find him in?" demanded Harmen.

"If not him, then the girl," called back Suerus, "I'd as lief find the girl."

Harmen walked on, a hundred odd paces, and slipped aside into a grass-grown ditch. He lay down on his folded coat, vexed, and watched for the pedlar's departure. The man's farewell words had brought home to him his complete ignorance of the fortress he was come to invade. Who lived in this loneliness of Lievendaal? What was Govert Blass like? Would he refuse to lend money on good security, a mortgage? If so, what next? Never mind about the next thing to the next!

Harmen had no idea what was meant by the word Suerus had used, "a philosopher." Had you pressed

him, he would probably have told you: "A stupid man who thinks he knows everything." But there's a deal of wisdom in his "Never mind about the next thing to the next." Old Suerus *was* a "philosophiser," as Harmen would have called it. "Don't think and it don't hurt." "Don't hurt and you won't think,"—pondered Harmen, too little of an adept to have discovered that a philosophic truth stays all right, upside down.

But "Hot's only hot by comparison,"—now that was undeniable and grateful common-sense. Aunt Josabet's little maid had found that out, in her way, as well as Old Suerus. Only because his life had been so cool hitherto, could a healthy young fellow cry out at a little hot water. Over Suerus' wise theory of graduated caloric the healthy young fellow, exhausted by forty hours of unfamiliar exertion, fell asleep in the ditch.

He started awake with the glow of the early evening all around him. The shadows lay motionless: the hush of the sun-sinking began to make itself felt. Through the silence rang a volley of harsh barks that had aroused him. He sprang up the bank and saw Socrates careering down the road, as if not only the skippy pedlar but the devil himself hung on behind. Harmen turned to the gateway, an old brown, brick tower, rather squat, with a dove-cot in its pyramid roof. Right and left spread the lily-covered moat, against overhanging beeches, brown-black. In the middle of the road lay a pair of men's boots. Harmen stooped to pick them up; as he passed beneath the wide-open tower, he found another smaller pair, and, just beyond, three slippers. With all these on his arm and over his clasped hands, he leant up against the ivy-grown portal and gazed awkwardly across two hundred feet of grass at the yellow-shuttered windows of the forbidding front. The windows gleamed, with white curtains. The house was another

bigger, brown tower, with ill-assorted modern bumps on both sides.

"Now for it!" said Harmen. The words can be a prayer.

As he stood, with a glance at the house and a glance at the boots, he became conscious of checked noises above him, like a mixture of giggles and grunts. He looked up; something hit him hard on the face, something bounced off his shoulders; something soft smashed in tricklings all over his head. The first blow had half stunned him; a coarse bellow in semi-foreign accents, accompanied those that followed; he had just time to speculate if this could be the girl Old Swearus had hoped to find in.

"Make that you go, or I shoot more!" cried the horrible voice in horrible Dutch. A couple of oranges lay about on the gravel: one, over-ripe, had burst as it struck. A young voice was heard in indignant protest. A hideous old head, square-jawed, brown leathern, with grey wisps, hung out of the window above the gate.

"Get you gone, you Jew thief!" screamed the head. "I told you I would, and I have!"

"Hush, Sannie, it isn't the same! And if it was —"

"What? do they all sell bad boots and bad books in this bad country? If more come —"

The young voice said, close behind Harmen—"I am so sorry. She means well."

He veered round. "It's a foreign way of showing it."

The young girl was out of breath with her rush down the steep stairs. She looked the most charming picture of confusion, not only because she was pretty by nature, but also because she felt so very much ashamed and so tempted to laugh.

"I am dreadfully sorry," she insisted, fighting her own

fancies. "You see, Sannie doesn't want me to buy any more boots."

Harmen held up the articles dangling about his arms and legs. The carpet slippers were gloriously brilliant. He was just going to explain when —

"She thought you were the Jew come back," hastily declared the girl. "Do you also sell boots?"

The imp of humour that sleeps at the bottom of every honest young Dutch peasant's heart opened one little eye and said, "Yes."

"That's what roused her. I am so vexed about the oranges. She forgot how over-ripe they are at this time of year."

"I'm glad they were ripe," said Harmen, semi-truthfully, wiping, as best he could, the juice that trickled down.

"I will come! I will kill him!" screamed the virago from the window.

The young people had shifted towards the grass. "Peace!" called the girl, laughing and nodding. She turned again gravely to Harmen. "Come in and wash your clothes. It was too bad of her. But it is true that the pedlar comes too often. I have bought too many boots; he is amusing; we are so quiet. And he wants to bring me trinkets and — rubbish. But I will not. I can only think of boots."

"This fool also — would he sell thee false curls?" cried the Boer-woman in her "taal."

"She calls everybody a fool," said the girl quickly. "Everybody but herself. She calls me fool. And my uncle. It is as if one should say a pronoun. So she says: he, she, you fool!"

"These slippers are beautiful — and dirt cheap!" said Harmen, extending two great gaudy, empty feet.

The girl looked at his bruised face, at his soiled

clothes. "I really need a pair of slippers," she said. "It isn't my size, but they might do for my uncle. Or the stable-boy. These are very—very nice. Do you think they would fit an average stable-boy?" She glanced furtively at Harmen's legs.

"Oh no, I don't think so," exclaimed the latter, alarmed. "I was only—"

The Boer-woman burst between them and whisked her young mistress round the corner of the house. The girl's protestful laughter died away.

The woman came back immediately, sullen but subdued. She opened a door into a sort of garden-room, containing a little Dutch washing-place, a so-called "fountain."

"You can clean yourself," she barked. "I'll bring you some beer. Give me the slippers"—she snatched at one, breaking the string, before he was aware. "Heavens! There's the master!" she slammed to the door. A horse had appeared in the frame-work of the gateway.

Thus was Harmen made welcome to Lievendaal.

CHAPTER XI

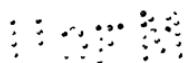
THE room was what they call a garden-chamber in Holland, with wide French windows, full of the outside flowers and the open air. On its white wall hung two portraits of public men, unknown to Harmen. They were Gladstone and Cobden. A closed bureau, with a cylinder-top stood sideways near the light. The rest of the furniture was plain, like that of an old-fashioned office. But all round the frieze were Transvaal hunting-trophies, heads and horns of various "boks" of South Africa. Rifles and native weapons were arranged under these. A lion's skin lay on the floor. Harmen forgot all about cleaning himself. He remembered after a moment, with a hasty flush. He wished he hadn't come.

"I will take these, if the price is fair." Govert Blass had entered. Harmen turned from the basin over which he was hurriedly dabbing his cheek.

"You!" cried the man in the doorway. In that word he had lost all command of his carefully schooled voice. Schooled, not by himself, but by fifty years of emotional combat and victory. A face that had been feruled by fate. A frame, powerfully built, that had squared its shoulders not to bend. He stood there, sun-burnt and brown-bearded, a man of kind looks and firm lips.

Harmen, black-haired and brick-necked, his eyes and mouth unscarred by life's battle, faced "the foreigner," with wet skin and damped coat.

"So you know me?" said Harmen.



Already Govert Blass had recovered himself. "I know who you are. I met you on the road only last night. You are the son of Steven Pols." He threw the glaring slipper on a side-table; in no case could it have fitted him.

"It was all a misunderstanding," said Harmen. "I picked them up, when the pedlar ran away."

"What pedlar? My niece spoke of an accident."

"It was all my fault. It is nothing," said Harmen, quickly. "Don't mention it. I came here because—"

The Boer-woman pushed open the door with a lumbering roll of her great body, and deposited a bottle on the table.

"I don't want any beer, thanks," said Harmen. The master of the house, his face in the shade, took no notice. The servant, knocking up against the young peasant, replied almost in a whisper, "Fool!"

"Go!" said the master, with a clear click like a whip. It spoke of his self-restraint. He closed the door. "You came here, because?"

"I hoped you would lend me money," said Harmen.

"Ha!" the tone of keen disappointment struck bewilderingly on the suitor's modest soul. What could the man have expected him to come for? Nothing to warrant such a cry.

"Your reason for coming is not an original one," said Blass.

Harmen hesitated. He was not such a fool that he couldn't comprehend inelaborate satire, but the sad change in the other's whole mien disconcerted him. The room was too small to pace; Govert Blass rubbed against the white wall and the window-post.

"Lend? Then it isn't for a charity. I'm a good deal out of your way. Who advised you to come here?" Again the tone changed; a flash of hope lightened it.

"A man I know," replied Harmen lamely, as one who keeps back the whole truth.

"A man!" the hope was gone. Then, with a slight sneer: "'Tis a wise child that knows its own father."

"My father is quite ignorant of my being here," exclaimed Harmen. He added eagerly: "So, of course, is my mother."

"Why should they be? Why so eager?" Blass waited a full moment. He looked out of the window, into the deepening evening. "You must tell me what you want," he said.

"I want a mortgage," answered Harmen, with a shy assumption of a business turn. "It's like this, Mynheer Blass. My father has got to pay a large sum of money."

"So it is for your father. What for?"

"Money that wasn't his own, and that has been called in."

"Money lent on a mortgage before? You want a new mortgage instead of an old one?"

"No," said Harmen, feeling in the tiresome position of a man who is up before a magistrate and can't lie.

"Sit down. You must give me your facts, if you want my assistance."

"I am not sure I have my father's permission, sir." The young man remained standing.

"Then go back and get it."

"I cannot do that." Harmen moved to the door.

Govert Blass intercepted him. "Stay where you are. And talk as you like."

Then the lad sat down. "It's like this," he explained. "Father must pay out eight thousand guilders, or the farm must be sold."

"I see," said the corn-factor, watching him closely in what light there still remained. "Eight thousand

guilders. Now, would you call that a large sum, or a small?"

"I would call it so large that I don't know how large it is," said Harmen.

"But you think I have got it here." Govert Blass slapped his pocket. "I have only to put my hand in—" he suited the action to the word.

"Mynheer Blass," said Harmen, reddening till the mark of the blow disappeared, "you tell me I am impertinent to come here like this. Well, I am. If you move from the door, I shall beg your pardon and go. I was advised you were a rich man. That's impertinent, too. There aren't any other in the neighbourhood as I knows on. I offer good security."

"What security?" the older man leant forward.

"The farm."

"The — yes, yes, I heard you. H'm — the farm."

"It must be worth more. A mortgage at a fair rate of interest."

"You have your father's authority? Oh no, I forgot; you haven't consulted your father. Nor, presumably, does he consult you."

"I didn't want to worry him till I knew I had some chance of success."

"Quite so. A fair rate of interest. That's my own word — my favourite word — fair!"

"I don't think I catch your meaning?" Harmen frowned.

"Well, our interests all clash so in this higgledy-piggledy world, the most we must aspire to is 'fair.' Drink your beer!"

"I should like to get through with my business first. It is business, is it not? Though I know that I'm asking you a favour."

"No, young man: business isn't favour, and favour isn't business."

"I think sometimes," maintained Harmen, doggedly, "a man may give another a helping hand without injuring himself."

"Business isn't a helping hand," said the man in the embrasure.

"Yet you advocate cheap bread," said Harmen, with a tingling boldness.

"I do," replied Blass, glancing at the print of Cobden. "But that's self-preservation. Ever heard of the Mouse-tower?"

"No," said Harmen, increasingly uncomfortable.

"How could you? The more we pay for the schools, the less you learn. There's one difficulty, young man. I never lend money."

"Not on a mortgage? Not through a bank?"

"Never. You've been frank with me. I'll be frank with you. Of course, I'm not near as rich as people think; none of us are. But what little money I've laid aside isn't invested at a fixed rate of interest — not one brass cent of it. Not even in debentures. It's all in shares. Are you business-man enough to seize the distinction?"

"No," said Harmen. "But you owe me no reason."

"All the same I am anxious to give one. You see, I've a prejudice against letting another man pay me a fixed price for the use of my money. It's unfair to him if he makes less, and unfair to me, if he makes more."

"We shan't make more," said Harmen. "I shall have to — never mind, you'll get your interest."

"Just so; d'ye call that fair? You were going to tell me you would have to work very hard to make up say three per cent. With bread cheap. And I drawing

four per cent. without lifting my finger. There's a usury of energy as well as a usury of gold. There was a time when the Christian Church forbade all lending on interest as *sin*. No Christians could be bankers in those days. Only Jews."

"I'm not clever enough for you to talk to," said Harmen, humble and humbled.

"Think it out at home. At any rate, the fad's mine. All my money is in my own business, or in shares in some other man's. You understand? I've gone shares with a good man or two in their profits and their risks."

"Yes," said Harmen, slowly. "I can understand the difference between lending money and going shares."

"You can! then there we are. If I let you have the money — I must look into the matter a bit — it will be on condition that I don't get any interest until there's a certain profit. Then I get a share of the profit. I believe I can safely do it. Cattle-farming's going to look up in these parts. That's better than dear bread."

Harmen started to his feet. "But that makes you a part-proprietor of the farm!"

The man at the window turned round. "You're quite smart enough to talk to, my lad," he said brusquely. "No, I don't want a share in the farm, I only want a share in the profits."

"And no share in the losses?" said Harmen.

The corn-factor smiled. "In the lean years, if they come, I shall get nothing."

"You believe in the fat ones?"

"Enough to risk my money." Again the corn-factor smiled. "We can limit my profits."

Harmen reflected long. "There's the mortgage," he said at last, "if it weren't for the mortgage, your risk

would be dispropo —" he broke down over the word.

Govert Blass held out his hand. " Didn't I tell you, the most we can aspire to is a sort of fairness? You accept, then? We must work out the particulars. You must leave me a little time to find the money."

Harmen clasped the proffered hand. " You're a good man, sir," he said. " And what a good man calls ' fair,' another good man —" he stopped short.

" Well?" replied Govert Blass, laughing outright, " another good man — meaning you?"

" No, I didn't mean that. I meant that if all men thought as you, we — I — we shouldn't have been in this fix."

" I shall be glad to help you out of it. And now you must have something to eat before you go back. It is late, and a long way. Few people ever come here. Haven't you that mare of yours?"

" I should like a drink now. I'm horribly thirsty."

" Nonsense. You've kept my supper waiting. Now you must share it." He threw open the door into the living-room. " Greta!" The voice that replied drew young Pols across the threshold.

Young Pols was not accustomed to business. He was still less accustomed to strangers, least of all to ladies. So he did homage to Greta as a sort of gentle-woman, which she wasn't; and he deemed the simple room luxurious, because it contained a piano, and he erroneously wrote down the staid owner of Lievendaal a very wealthy man. He gazed about him awkwardly, and tried to put away, out of sight, his half a dozen hands. Flowers on the table at which people ate! His mother, certainly, at Eben-Haëzar, spent more time than, in her husband's stern estimation, she could reasonably account for over plants that " were only for show," but

she kept them in their proper places, out in the garden, or at most on the window-sill. A piano! Harmen squinted across at that curious and uncanny instrument, capable of producing such a complicated noise!

"I hope you like my poppies?" said Greta, following his eyes. Her own reverted, as Harmen felt, to the bruise upon his cheek. Intercourse becomes laborious between new acquaintances when these have no subjects in common except such as they desire to avoid. "They're nothing as bright or as big as the ones at Trikkelstroom," said Greta.

"Humph!" blew the Boer-woman. The poppies hung their heads.

"They're bigger in our part," said Harmen, suddenly pleased, his mouth full. "I'll bring you some."

"Your soil beats ours hollow," agreed the corn-factor. He began to talk of crops, cattle-breeding, politics. He talked gravely, well, like a man who has thought much before he speaks. Now, for politics Harmen cared enough to read his nightly paper and hold his tongue. "Politics?—pooh!" old Steven would say, wrinkling his eye-sockets over the market list. "Seek thou first the kingdom of God!"

"An honest return for your work!" declared Blass. "If all men were content with that, you'd have no row here over a General Election! You go to Transvaal, if you want to see every soul alive grabbing at more than his share. A man comes back from there, sick of money for ever. The gold's red there, red with the other fellow's blood." He swallowed a deep draught of beer. "Give me the happy mean—doesn't the Bible say that? I'm not much of a Bible reader. Not much of a reader any way. And Church is too far off. I hold on to a few truths, and a couple of leaders I've

found in a full life. Did you see that portrait in my room — the man with the big nose?"

"Yes," said Harmen. "A relative of yours?" Greta laughed.

"Well, it wasn't the Queen," protested the young peasant, annoyed. Portraits in people's rooms were the Queen or relations.

"Transvaal's a good country," cut in the Boer-woman. She brought in the dishes and sat down with the company and sulked. Her parents had named her Sannie, because no woman within fifty miles of Trikkelstroom had ever been called anything else. Your sole individuality, in a community of three surnames, must be sought in your farm. Sannie, uprooted from hers into a land of permanent bad weather, found comfort in low spirits, and in strong.

"It's bally hot," said Sannie, varying her habitual complaint of the damp.

"We shall have a thunderstorm presently, and plenty of rain," suggested Harmen, cheerfully.

Greta laughed again. "Yes, nice damp rain," she said. "Not like South African rain, which is dry."

"Sannie's forgotten sand-storms," remarked Blass, helping the guest to things the guest didn't need.

"There were no sand-storms in our part," retorted the Boer-woman. She pushed the butter out of Harmen's reach.

"Her part was the Paradise Corner of South Africa," nodded Greta, and pushed the butter back. "Have some?"

"Thank you — yes — no," blurted Harmen, out amongst "strangers" for the first time in his life, red and clumsy. "I mean, I haven't got any." And he cut a big chunk, and dropped it, on the table-cloth. It slid away, half melted, over his pursuing knife; the

Boer-woman said "Fool!" with conviction. Greta arrested the fugitive's course. Blass meditatively, eyes downcast, spread his own thin slice.

"When Adam began to describe Paradise to his children, he had been a long time outside," said Blass. "I was beginning to picture Overstad as a Paradise — then I came back."

Harmen glanced affrighted at the man's niece, who smiled perfunctory recognition of the jest. That smile was to him an amazing discovery. There existed then milk-white, innocent maidens, who could listen to blasphemy and smile? Maidens who did not know that the Bible had dropped straight, in low Dutch, from high heaven? He flung-to the door on such a thought. It was as if that nice girl had suddenly said: "D——!"

He began to question the uncle, courageously, about sand-storms and crops. He asked, still more courageously, with some stumbling, whether, when he came back, he could be allowed to see the prize cows? The English pigs?

"The man doesn't take beer!" violently interrupted the Boer-woman. Greta, still laughing, went round to the other side.

"Only oranges?" she asked coolly, filling Harmen's glass. She nodded at the Boer-woman — a peace-offering and a threat. But Sannie grumbled on, all through the meal, chiefly *sotto voce*, her grumble helping to relieve the frequent silences. She objected, as a personal affront, to the fact that all present ate so much less than she. She ate long and loudly; at last she stumbled away with the dishes. Blass got a cigar. "They are good," he said, with a smile. "And so is the brandy. Every man has a right to get those two good, if he can. Don't you think so? Have a drink!"

"When he takes so little of both," said Greta, looking

at the Boer-woman, in the doorway. The latter grumbly stumbled away to her pipe and her rum.

Harmen Pols stood, booby-like, before the "Juffrouw."

"Good night," he said. "You—you spoke of the little calf you nursed, that died last spring. There's—there's a calf at our place, born last night—you could nurse from the beginning." She hesitated, consulting Blass, with a glance.

"It's a very pretty calf with a white star," continued Harmen, suddenly pleading. "Not as fine, of course, as a Lakeveld. But I wish you would let me bring it. Your fa—uncle has been so kind."

"Stow that!" said Govert Blass, unexpectedly, with great energy, in Dutch. He almost hustled the young fellow into the passage; Greta's gratitude rippled after them. Sannie could be heard banging the kitchen door.

"She always bangs the door," said the corn-factor with a sigh. "You wonder why we keep her? Oh, she's a bit of the old home. She can talk to Greta about the people yonder and about all the things that happened long ago. We're very quiet here. It was kind of you to offer that little beast. Bring it and we'll settle about the money. Bring it soon. Good night."

Govert Blass paused upon the threshold, watching his visitor disappear into the dusk and through the gateway.

"It was *that*, of course," he reasoned to himself, "that she wished to ask me to-night. Did her courage fail her, or her pride conquer, again? She has never spoken before; I am certain she spoke now. Why, if she were to whisper on my grave, I should hear." He ground his heel into the stone of the passage, laughing grimly. "After all we don't know that," he said, un-

der his breath. "The boy isn't like her. I am glad he is not. And as for his being like me!" he laughed aloud.

Harmen, turning through the gateway, knocked up against a dim vision in white.

"Oh," gasped Greta, her hands full of boots and slippers, "do you think you could take him back these? And—oh no, I'll keep them, poor fellow! Would you pay him? And—oh, I shall be missed, but it's my only chance—would you tell him to give you the two books he spoke about, and you—would you bring them, and I'll give you the money—all the money—when you bring the calf?"

"Books?" said Harmen, as breathless, but not from running. "All right."

"There's no harm in them. Novels. Uncle doesn't like them. I do, and I've hardly read any—only a few child's books. I *must* disobey him; it isn't as if he were my father. Life is so quiet here. They're nice books, the Jew said; you don't mind?"

"I don't know," said Harmen doubtfully, quite wretched. "Your uncle's been so good to me—if he doesn't like it?"

"Then don't!" cried the girl in anger, and ran away. She left Harmen standing on the other side of the ditch, staring at the house. Staring, as if he could see the light of the house inside it, brighter than any candle or paraffin lamp. Never had he beheld anything so resplendently imperious and overwhelming, that knocked you over, and left you blinking. So burning. So touch-me-if-you-dare.

A note from the piano. Another. She could make the thing work, then! Wonderful! At the wedding they had rattling dances. He didn't understand about

this squeaky band-out-of-a-box, that people sat listening to, with fixed faces, in silence, for hours.

A little run, and then the fresh young notes of a girl's voice! Singing, the brightest and simplest of singing, in the quiet of the early summer night.

He could enjoy *that*; he crept back under the shadow. A great beech spread above him. A voice like an angel's, or a bird's.

Angel's voices leave much to the imagination. Harmen could distinguish the notes of half the singing-birds in Holland. A woman's tutored tones were quite a strange experience. His mother had never tried to sing; his aunt's singing had never been anything but a trial.

He stood under the darkling tracery, a wide-strung bronzen glory; he peered up into the ascending light and blackness that closed far aloft, a dense mass against the sky.

Out into the solemn stillness, warm and gentle, stole, like some hitherto unheard warbling, the melody of this simple tune. Liquid human sweetness, note after note, breaking away from the mystery behind the blinded, lighted window, away from the pleasant scene, now hidden, hastening after him to hold him, where he lingered, solitary, amid the hushed caresses of the velvet-breathing night.

“Jolly!” he thought, where he stood, with a curious quiver in his great limbs.

“Oh, meet me in the lane, when the clock strikes nine!”

A man's song, really — a call to a woman will she come? A music-hall favourite of Govert's boyhood, a thing she always sang, when he asked for it, immediately sang. Without looking round, since that time when

once, looking round, she had seen him motionless, his face down in his hands.

“To call thee mine!”

The music ceased. To Harmen, of course, it had been wordless. Only a marvellous new emotion of sound. Only a sensuous ecstasy in nerves he wasn’t aware he’d got. He had drawn nearer under cover of the branches. He saw a shadow pass against the panes: he waited till he heard a more familiar music, the rumble of a sewing-machine. Then, with a gasp and a grin, he broke away, for home.

For home, with the brave news of success. Of trouble lifted, safety secured. To-morrow they could face Roel, the adventurer, and cast his money at his feet. To-morrow night he, Harmen, would take across the calf to Lievendaal. In the morning he must get hold of Suerus, restore the value of the goods, secure the books. Perhaps he would hear her sing again. A wonderful thing that — a woman’s voice. How different from the noise they made in church, or at a fair!

It was a long way to walk, even at this pace, in the solemn, silent night. The country was strange to him. Once or twice, all alone thus along the endless road, between the shapeless cattle, as he mused upon his single-handed achievement — their common deliverance — his heart leaped in its gladness, his feet followed suit. He ran a few steps; he skipped; he clapped his hands; he sang.

Aghast, he stood silent, comparing his coarse shout with her song. And again he stepped staidly, the singing in his heart alone.

Nearer home, by the water, where the brushwood rose, fantastic, to greet him, yonder in the dim black copses the air was full as yesternight of the loves of the nightingales. They echoed and echoed to each other,

at his right, on his left, by the distant horizon, behind and before. Their joy was the joy of the universe, the joy of beauty and the joy of desire. The world knows no other; it fills to overflowing the great heart of God's image, as it fills to bursting the small heart of the winged passion from heaven. That night it awoke in the stillness, the loneliness, the listening immensity of pale sky and grey meadow-land: it swelled and sank, and caught up again, onward and onward: it trembled and twinkled in the air, as sunlight strikes the water, illuminating with a myriad emotions the universe of sight and of sound that lies slumbering within the soul of man. It called to him; it cried out to him, ferociously, the joy which is the joy of beauty and successful achievement; the joy, far greater, which is the passion of yearning and of hope. The singing of creation was around him, was with him, as the voice of a woman was in him. He cried to it whilst, jubilant, he ran.

CHAPTER XII

ON the bridge, under the poplars, he drew breath. The farm-buildings slept, a dim mass, against the darker foliage, beneath the sapphire sky. Eben-Haëzar. His home was still his, was his again.

By the stable door a grim figure loomed forth. "Hist!" called a low voice to the dog.

"It's me, father," said Harmen.

"Oh?" answered Steven. "The calf's dead." He went back into the building. Harmen, dazed as by a blow, followed.

The paraffin lamp was burning, grimy and yellow, over the stall. It flared up with a gasp. Harmen turned it down. The old man watched him.

"Dead!" said the old man. The calf lay there, like a half-filled sack, black and white.

"What killed him? He seemed all right this morning," questioned Harmen.

"Oh, yes," spoke old Steven deliberately. "Yes, he was all right this morning. All right." The sick cow, in the further distance, moaned.

"What killed him?" repeated the farmer, with sudden intensity. "Ruin killed him. Misfortune killed him. What d'ye call it?—the Decree that goes forth against a man, when his day's come, and beggars him! That killed him. My day's come. My own son's helped. She'll die too." He pointed towards the distant stall.—"Die? There was no reason why the calf should die; that's why it died. Reason enough, when the curse comes." His gaunt finger shook; he stood

in the lurid light and shadow. "My own son's helped," he said.

The lamp smelt bad. The whole place was full of oppression and apprehension.

"Dead!" repeated Harmen, all his thoughts of his promise unfulfilled.

"Long Katrine died too," said the old man. His pipe hung empty from his lips.

"I've got the money," said Harmen.

The father's eyes turned listlessly to the son's in the thickening haze.

"What money?" asked Steven with but indolent interrogation. "Where's the horse?" he broke out fiercely. "What have you done with the horse?"

"She's all right. The money you sent me for. The money you need." He dug his hands deep into his pockets, as if the gold was there.

The old man had taken the lamp; it swayed in his hand; he would not — nay, not at the last trump! — have dropped a lamp in a stable. But he answered, in a hoarse voice, "Tell me, tell me what you have to tell. You can't have *got* the money. Money isn't got."

"I went to Govert Blass," said young Harmen, calmly exultant. "He will lend it us."

"You — went — to — whom did you say?"

"To Blass, the rich merchant of Lievendaal."

"Yes, yes; I have heard of the man."

"Why, it's the one who drives past here every evening on his way to the post!"

"Yes, yes, yes: that's the man. What made you go to *him*?"

"There's not so many rich men in this neighbourhood to choose from," answered Harmen. Then he added, with recalcitrant sincerity: "Roel advised me."

Again the lamp swayed. The old man set it down.

"Advised you? Roel? What business has Roel with our affairs?"

"He knows about the money."

"Yes, the need of it. God!—*them's* his own!"

"He has spoken to Blass. Knew him for a decent chap. So he is, father."

"Is he? I have never spoken to Blass. True, they say he's well off. A warm man." Steven faintly kicked the collapsed bag at their feet. "His calves don't die."

"He is a generous man, father. I have been to him. I like him: so would you. He will give me the money."

"Give?" screamed old Steven. He turned on his son with meagre, uplifted fists. "Give?—do you say? Are you mad?"

Harmen recoiled. He tried to answer.

"Give to you?" screamed Steven. "To *you*? Are you mad?"

"Hush, father! Lend, I mean, of course. Lend on interest."

"Ah, on interest!" Old Steven's voice sank to sudden repose. "Why don't you speak as you mean, stupid? On interest, naturally. What interest, pray?"

"A share in the profits, father."

"I don't understand," said the old man, harshly. "Never mind, for the moment. Govert Blass is a man of business. His share in the profits'll mean more than a share in the property."

"Oh no, father: I offered him a mortgage," replied Harmen with excusable complacency.

"And he took that," said the old man at last. For there had been quite a long pause before he spoke.

"Why, of course he took it—a mortgage of eight thousand guilders on a farm that is worth twice that sum." Harmen waited a little anxiously, wondering.

"Quite right," said the old man. "Aye. Aye."

He nodded his old head sagaciously. "Twice that sum, eh? Thrice, may be? But times are bad. A share in the profits? Ah!"

"Blass said he felt confident that they would look up."

"Did he? Look up? He's a man of business, too. And if they don't look up, then no share in the profits, eh?"

"No, certainly not," said Harmen. "All the larger, when they do."

"Naturally," answered Steven. "Naturally." The word pleased him: he repeated it several times, talking and thinking to himself, his eyes on the dead calf. He turned to his son again, with one of those fierce movements from which the latter had vainly striven not to wince away, as a lad. "Eben-Haëzar!" he cried "The Lord helps in His own way! Sometimes it's a mighty queer way. But you're one of the young ones, the modern sort. You don't think 'tis the Lord arranges things — eh?"

"Of course I do," answered Harmen, angry, annoyed.

"Well — well: sometimes I'm not half sure. I'm old. I've seen a lot of queer things. So you went to Govert Blass. The Lord knows why He sent you there. All the same, 'tis give and take in the next world — and in this. And in this." He shuffled to the door, leaving the light with his son, in the stall. He munched his dead pipe as he went. "Now you've got the money, why don't you go up to your bed?" he said. "There's some cold supper on the table. She would leave it there, though she maintained you were never coming home. I knew better."

"Did you think I would come back without the money?" asked Harmen suddenly.

The old man paused. "Yes," he said. He said it, because he desired to say no.

"You don't know me," burst out Harmen. "You have never known me. One'd think I wasn't no son of yours."

The old man made no further reply. He stumbled out. He left Harmen standing, greatly ruffled, in the russet light, beside the poor dead beast. "Psha!" said Harmen after a minute, with that backward fling of his head. He took up the clumsy bundle in his arms and laid it in the other stall, against Long Katrine. From their corners the sick cows listened: the further one, wishing to attract attention, moaned. "Cheer up!" called Harmen.

He had not spoken to old Steven of the make-believe supper at Lievendaal, but when he saw what his mother had set out — the French sausage, the fruit-tart, remnants of yesterday's banquet — he fell-to, after his long strain and long walk, with the heartiest appetite. And his bed was the resting-place of a man — aged three and twenty — who has done wisely, and warily, and well.

Such was not the repose of Jennie, sitting up amongst the stifling feathers, expectant. "He has come home," she said, the moment old Steven stumbled in. She blew out the light.

"Like your saving ways," he grumbled, as he knocked up against a chair. She smiled: no, she was not stingy; in his life-long parsimony he had reproached her a thousand times for her want of thrift.

"I knew he would," she added.

"What? Ah well, you're a woman. A woman never knows what she thinks till she no longer thinks it. The calf's dead."

"Did he eat?"

" Eat? No. The calf that was born last night."

" Ah, yes! Dear, dear! And Katrine dead too. I'm glad he's back."

" Living people come back all right. It's dead cows that are a dead loss."

" True."

" Few men that die are a loss like a dead cow."

" Dead!" she echoed. " Dead! Don't heap on the word. It breeds death."

" There's no need: the curse'll do that!" he grumbled.

She cried out: " Don't say that! Don't talk like that! There isn't any curse! What do you mean, Steven? To talk like that is to bring it about."

" It don't want bringing," he repeated crossly. He stood by the bed in the dark. " Life's all muck," he said.

She sighed assent. " But God's good," she said faintly. " He must be. Or He wouldn't be God."

" You don't even ask about the money!"

" Oh yes, the money. Of course he has brought it, or he wouldn't have come back."

" He has got it," said the old man, irritably, as if almost unwilling.

" I am glad," she said from the bottom of her heart. " Tell me all about it, Steven. You see, God is good."

" God or your fairies," said the old man suddenly, with concentrated spite. " Six of the one, perhaps, and half a dozen of the others. My God or your fairies, perhaps."

He roused her. " Your God is a hard bond-holder," she said, mantling. " My fairies at least do what they do for nothing."

" Do they?" he answered. " Do they? He has got the money from Blass."

She caught her breath. That was all.

"Come!" he urged. "Well? What?"

"I said nothing. What should I say? I am waiting for you to explain."

"You may wait long." His voice broke down: all the anger and provocation went out of it; nothing remained but a long murmur of pain. "I can't explain."

He went away to the window: he stood staring into the blue greyness, the star-spangled stillness of the night.

"Govert Blass, the rich corn-factor of Lievendaal," he said, "is willing to lend us the money. The man who drives past here every evening to the post."

"Yes," she said, "the man who drives past here every evening to the post."

Each listened for the other; at last she could delay no longer.

"What made him? What made the boy go to him?" she said with a rush.

"Roel Slink sent him."

"Roel! How can that be? Roel?"

"You go on asking questions. I tell you once for all, I have no answer. I don't want an answer. I thank God I haven't got one."

"Roel Slink! Why Roel Slink?" she repeated from the bed.

"Did *you* ever speak to Roel of this man?"

"I — no, how should I? Except about his coming past. Come away from the window, Steven. Why do you speak like that — wildly — about thanking God? Govert Blass is a rich man, why shouldn't he lend the money, on fair terms?"

"On fair terms? He gives it. Do you like that better?"

"You must be mistaken," she said coldly. "Harmen wouldn't take money from a stranger." Her two hands clutched the two sides of the bed.

Now he turned from the wide outer world to the close gloom inside.

"But a stranger, you think, might offer money to Harmen?"

"You're mistaken," she reiterated, with fierce persistence, against her own wavering. She threw one leg over the bed-side. "I will go to him and ask him," she said. "We are nothing to this man. What you tell cannot be true."

"Wait!" he commanded, and he pushed her back. "You are right about your son. For he doesn't know that the farm is mortgaged."

"This man, Blass, proposed a mortgage!" she cried, with a great gladness of relief. "Well, why shouldn't he? Harmen thought it was all right. He must be told."

"It was Harmen proposed, and the other man accepted the mortgage."

"Well, that's just the same. They must be told."

"One of them needn't be told, for he knows."

"Who knows? You are maddening, Steven. God forgive you the way you love to torture me without sense!"

He had lighted the candle; he held it up to her, the common, flaring dip.

"Has it no sense?" he said. "Do you not know who gave us the first mortgage?"

"Yes," she faltered. "The Notary at Vrederust, the year we married."

"That is all you know? Nothing else? You are quite sure?" He thrust forward the candle, till it nearly touched her face. She did not shrink back from it. She sat up, clutching the wooden planks of the old bedstead, a white face, in the flare.

"It is all I know," she said.

"Blass supplied the money. I found that out, in the year of the cattle plague, when the Notary didn't press for the interest. Now he doesn't want any interest at all; a share of the profits, he says! And no security!" He put down the candle. "I don't believe you knew," he said. "Not even a woman could lie like that."

"I did not know. How should I? What does it matter? Why do you think women lie?"

"Because Satan made 'em so: but the Lord took care you could sometimes see 'em doing it. The world wouldn't be habitable else."

"It isn't habitable now," she said, "except that we have to inhabit it." She checked herself. "No—no, I didn't mean that. Don't let's be foolish, Steven! Come to sleep."

"Blass provided the money," said Steven, without stirring. "Well, why shouldn't he? A first mortgage. But why Blass, eh? Just before he went to South Africa. And he never inscribed it in the registers. I went to the registrar, and it wasn't inscribed! The Notary said he didn't want it inscribed! Now what does that mean—a mortgage that isn't inscribed? Answer me that!"

"I can't answer," she said faintly.

"No, nor can I. Though I've been searching for the answer these five and twenty years. All the time we've been married. A mortgage that hasn't been inscribed!"

He waited a moment: he sniffed. "This, at least, had some meaning," he continued. "He could claim the money from *me*, if not from a third person. And he got his interest. But now, he gives the new money to Harmen! Gives it, merely because the boy goes and asks for it, Jennie!"

"If that's so, then you will not accept it."

"Indeed, I accept it."

She struck her arm against his, as he leant forward, dashing back the candle he had again lifted, from her face to his own.

“From a stranger?” she cried.

“The man isn’t a fool, and he isn’t a child. The offer is his; he knows why. For us ’tis a deliverance! We are saved. The house is ours!”

“Mortgaged over the chimneys!”

“Mine to work in, mine to die in, just the same!”

“No—oh no,” she choked. “Not yours. His. Pride—”

He did not heed her. “Eben-Haëzar!” he said.

She was silent.

“The Lord hath holpen,” he said.

Still she was silent.

“Or your fairies!” he added, and some of the pent-up scorn in his sealed bosom blazed forth. Scorn of life, scorn of man, not of her.

“You have money downstairs,” she said.

He tried to elude her, lamely. “The boy hasn’t brought it away in his pocket. Roel must wait a week.”

“You have money in the cellar, Steven.”

“I?—what makes you think that? Not a hundred guilders’ worth of cheese.”

“You were talking of not—of not making fun. The money in the cupboard—why don’t you use that?”

The old man coughed. “Making fun?” he said. “Yes, yes, that’s the word. Making fun. Right so. I won’t make fun. I haven’t got, in any cupboard, any money I can use.”

“That is a half-truth,” she replied, her accents as troubled as his.

He struck his hand on the lighted candle, but it spluttered up along the wick. “Are you a witch?” he cried; all the time-mask had dropped from his old face. “Do

you think you are? Your cunning goes wrong. We'll take our money where we find it! From the hand of Govert Blass!"

But she followed her own swift thoughts, ignoring his.

"You made me swear," she said, her words lagging as her thoughts flew. "You know what I swore, and what I wouldn't swear. Women don't ask for oaths. Tell me you've no money of your own, and I won't—tell Harmen."

"Tell Harmen! Of the safe!" he cried, standing gaunt, as the candle-flame jagged aloft.

"I don't want to. I don't want to." She hung back in the pillow bed. "But we can't take the money from Blass—oh, we can't! I must tell Harmen that. I don't know how. I must explain. Oh, we cannot—we cannot—we cannot!" She leapt to the floor; in feverish haste she gathered some few articles of clothing about her, speaking the while. "Answer me! Say that—only say that! Answer me, Steven! Say what I asked! Speak!"

"It is mine to ask, and yours to obey," he said, straining out the syllables. "If you read your Bible, and harkened to the voice of the Lord, instead of filling your mind with foolishness and fairies, you would know that a wife is subservient,"—he said "subservant"—"to her husband. Go back to your bed."

"Answer me!" she cried. "At least let me go to him with clean hands. Let me say we are honestly poor."

She stood with her arm against the door, for one moment. Then, as he stretched across to catch at the shawl she had wrapped around her, she broke away, and fled, trailing it up the stairs.

CHAPTER XIII

HARMEN opened his eyes, to see his mother, half-dressed, in her night things, standing motionless, close by his bed. His was a little attic corner, off the garret, over the long barn. In the dim moonlight that slanted through his single roof pane, he felt the grey apparition, touched its distress.

“What’s wrong?”

“Hush!” she gasped, and she listened, as if she had been followed. They heard nothing.

“Thieves?”

“No, Harmen.”

“They’d find little to steal.”

She did not immediately contradict him. She sank on a box, not too close to him. Behind her, on poles down the garret, hung great daubs of grey linen, drying and airing after the feast.

“Boy, tell me!” she said. “You went there — to Lievendaal? You spoke to the man?”

“Why, mother, you frightened me: can’t the story wait till to-morrow?” he yawned.

“No, I want it to-night.”

He grinned, unwilling to thwart her even in a trifle. But so sleepy, so contentedly sleepy. “I told father,” he complained, “I just went to the richest man in the neighbourhood.”

“Yes,” she nodded. “That’s plain.”

“He’s arranged it. ‘Tis a business transaction. Women don’t understand business. Father understood.” Harmen yawned.

"What did he say? Did he speak to you? Did you see himself?"

"He said a lot. I'll tell you to-morrow. He's a very nice man."

"Is he? Was he kind to you? Civil, I mean? Friendly?"

"Very friendly. He has a niece who sings like an angel. And a horrid Boer servant that throws over-ripe oranges."

"What's the niece like? Like him? Yes, I'd heard he had a niece with him. Is she pretty? Is she like him? Oh, I don't really care. It's not that I came for. You never heard an angel sing."

"Well, she sings like angels ought to. Better than any nightingale. Nightingales are second best, though. I left the window open."

"I hear them," she said impatiently.

"I was dreaming of the Boer-woman, when you came up. Better close down the window. You'll catch cold in them things."

"Cold? I'm red-hot," she said. "'Tis the hottest night of the year."

"The Boer-woman wants a thunder-storm," said Harmen, and laughed.

"It was Roel Slink sent you there? Tell me, Harmen! I came up about that—and about other things. I couldn't rest. Why Roel?"

"Yes, it was Roel."

"But why!" she cried wildly. "Why did *he* send you there? What does he know? Oh, my God, I shall go mad, unless I find out."

He left his bed; he dragged on his trousers; he went slowly to her, in pity and bewilderment. "Why, mother—little mother!" he said. "You're worn out with

worrying. It's all right now, mother. We've got the mortgage, and we'll pay it off in time."

She sank her head on her two hands and burst into weeping.

"I'll tell you about Roel," he continued, sitting down beside her. "It's rather a nice little story. You'll like it. Quite in the beginning, when Roel was first with us, Blass flared up because Roel mentioned your name."

She quivered under his arm. "That can't be," she sobbed, against her spread hands, in the dim moonlight. "Roel is a liar. How could Mynheer Blass flare up about me?"

"Not about you exactly. For of course he doesn't know you. It happened at Vulsevol's. He told Roel not to speak about women in a tap-room. 'Go to him,' says Roel to me this morning. 'There's a man thinks decently of women, at any rate.' Them was Roel's words. So I went."

"So you went," she sobbed.

"Don't cry like that, little mother! He's a good man. Roel wants his money. But the fellow was right."

"Thinks decently of women," she murmured. "Was that what he said? Is that all, Harmen? We're—we're in a cloud of lies. And every man thinks he may lie to a woman. We women, we don't speak lies—not very often. We only live them." His arm was about her shoulder; it but made her weep the more.

"Oh, Harmen, your father!"—she clung to him—"your father!"

"Well, what?" But she only clung to him. "He doesn't understand," she said presently. "He—I—he is very good to me."

Then her voice dropped so, he bent to catch the words.

"One thing only is quite clear and certain; we can never take a stiver from Blass."

He would have questioned, protested; she wisely left him no time.

"You must go back to-morrow and tell him. You see, he's a philanthropist, but we can't take a present from a stranger. It *is* a present — no, listen, Harmen!" — her voice, shrill with weeping, rose above his and beat it down:

"The farm's mortgaged already!"

"Mortgaged?" faltered Harmen. His soul staggered within him.

"That makes all the difference. You didn't know!"

"Nor did he," stammered Harmen. "It makes all the difference. I must go and tell him to-morrow. Why, mother, we're — we're — we haven't got anything. We must sell the farm." The revulsion was too complete. But he was a manly man; his voice steadied itself. He left his mother: he went to the window, and clashed it down. "Damn the nightingales!" he said.

"Oh, Harmen, don't take on like that! There's happiness in other places than this farm."

"Of course there is," said Harmen. "But a beggar!"

"It isn't as if you had a wife and children, dear."

"No — last night you were advising me to get them."

"You must wait a bit. And — and — he is a philanthropist, I tell you, Harmen" (she said "philanderist"), "even when you tell him, he may want to lend the money, but he mustn't."

"We can pay him heavy interest!" said Harmen, with sudden hope.

"Would he take that?"

"No — hang it, he said he wouldn't," exclaimed Harmen.

"There, that ends it!" she replied with a wretched note of triumph. She shivered.

"I suppose so," said Harmen, dubitatively. She caught the doubt.

She drew her scant garments about her, the white shift, the shawl. She came to him; she stood behind him, her cheek against her arm.

"I will tell you what I have never told, not even your father," she breathed. "Before I — married, when I was quite, quite young, at Overstad, I was engaged for a short time, secretly, to Govert Blass, to — to marry him." She stopped; he could feel her chest heaving. With a great effort she whispered: "I broke it off."

They stood there, close up against each other. "No," said Harmen, "we can't."

"He went out to Transvaal the week after my marriage. I have never spoken to him since."

"Was he a rich man, mother — then?"

"He wasn't poor."

"You didn't like him enough?"

"I did not think we could be happy."

"He doesn't know about the mortgage," said Harmen, "You spoke true, mother; this is the end." She had expected him — however unreasonably — to reproach her — to accuse her passionately, as her husband would undoubtedly have done, with being, somehow, the cause of their downfall. His reticence inflamed her, as no taunts could have done. The thought that was burning within her flashed in fire to her lips.

"We aren't ruined, if your father has money!"

She had curled her arm behind his shoulders, her fingers were under his chin.

"We must ask him," she said. "We must make quite certain he can do nothing. I can't bear to feel that lump in your throat."

"It isn't there!" he said.

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of onions and heaps of potatoes. The door in that radiant corner which Harmen had never known to move, gaped wide, casting a swoln shadow. And against the green metal inner panel lay, hunched-up, his keen face ablaze on the letter-lock, the old man, in his work-a-day clothes.

He turned his eyes — the eyes only, starting under their eagle-bushes — and saw the two who stood there, half-dressed, the young man in his shirt, the terrified face behind, on the steps.

“ Both? ” he said. “ So much the better. I fell! ”

He dragged himself up before his son could reach him.

“ It’s nothing, ” he said. “ I was bending too far forward, ” and he kicked away angrily the smashed potato on which his foot had slipped.

“ You aren’t really hurt? ” questioned Harmen. His gaze was on his father, but also, as that father felt, on the six candles. And on the metal door.

Suddenly Steven Pols surrendered. “ It’s no use, ” he said addressing his wife. “ I can’t see. And my hand shakes. ”

“ Let me do it for you, ” she said very tenderly.

“ Oh! ” he made furious answer, “ you can do it for yourself. ”

The son gazed from the one to the other. The child who loves best edges softly away from parental disruptions he cannot for the moment bridge over. Harmen waited.

“ Take it, ” said the old man in utter abandonment. “ Do what you like with it! But hear me first. ”

He motioned his wife forward. She fell back, pushing the son.

“ Tell him the letters, ” she said. “ It is right he should know. ”

“ The money first! ” urged the old man eagerly, ex-

tending his thin claws. "Get it out! Lay it here!"

"But what am I to do?" The son knelt on one knee, his fingers bungling at the copper disk.

"Shew him! Shew him, Jennie! You know!" insisted the old man, and bent forward, his whole face drawn out, like a beak. "I can't see, I tell you. Light him! No, you don't want the candles — you don't!"

"Z," she said, her deft touch over the lad's square finger-tops. "So you twist them — o—e—n!"

"How well you remember!" said the watchful old man. "O—e—n; that spells 'Kiss,' Harmen, doesn't it? A pretty word. Kiss."

The heavy mass of metal swung forward. "Ha!" cried Steven, and tore out of the dark receptacle the confused heap of papers it contained.

"My secret is yours!" he spat at the pair who cowered on the ground dumb in their distress. He shook his fist, with the crushed bank-notes bulging out at all sides, in their faces. "It wasn't mine to keep any longer. Never again could I have made the letters to fit." He flung the handful on an inverted barrel, marked "Compost." In his haste to get at the lights he knocked up against the safe-door, floundering to regain his hold. The candle flickered sideways. He must have hurt himself. His wife screamed.

"Don't disturb yourself!" he said. "I shan't set fire to the place. It isn't insured!" For Steven Pols belonged to the sort, by no means uncommon in Holland, who consider insurance an intrusion on the special rights of Providence.

"It's money!" said Steven, thrusting his fingers amongst the banknotes. "Money, money, money. Count!"

Harmen stood by the barrel. He had never seen anything resembling this heap of treasure before.

"Count!" commanded the father. "Piece by piece!"

Old Steven clutched the candlesticks, three in each hand, anyhow, dripping, as they hung. They flared aloft, all crooked, with lurid flashes, and smoke.

"Ten — twenty — thirty —" counted Harmen, mechanically smoothing out the ruffled squares.

The mother paid no heed to this addition. Her gaze did not swerve from her husband's face. A whole life of grinding penury, grinding to the bone. Years of straining to lengthen two ends that never meet. Sleepless nights, with such treasure asleep down below.

"Seven hundred!" said Harmen, with a glance of stupefaction at the heaps still uncounted. He took up a fresh sheaf.

"Money," said the old man, stooping with his candles, till the grimy papers must have smelt in his nostrils. "It does most of the good in this world; and all the harm."

"Five thousand guilders," announced Harmen, with a gulp.

"Make it eight," said old Steven, imperturbably. He carefully put down his candles, and, harking back to the strong box, dragged from its innermost recesses three flimsy scraps, which he threw on to the barrel.

"A thousand guilders," murmured Harmen; "and a thousand; and a thousand." He looked up into his father's eyes. His voice failed him.

"That is all," said old Steven. "Your aunt's share."

"Then I needn't have gone to Blass at all?" protested Harmen.

"The money isn't mine," said Steven.

"Not yours?" exclaimed mother and son.

"You mean that it's Carlina's?" eagerly added the mother, sickening in mingled hope and fear.

"It isn't mine. Don't ask no question. It's yours, if you like."

"How?" pleaded Jennie. "Ours?"

"Take it, if you dare."

"Father, you must tell me," said Harmen. He spoke quite softly. With one hand he struck, softly, the tall pile before him. The light flashed on his white forehead. She thought she had never heard such irresistible bidding. Surely princes spake thus.

"It was mine," answered the old man, calmed. "I have earned it. I have saved it. Bit by bit. In these twenty-four years. Now you come, and you take it away from me."

"No, by Heaven, we take nothing," said Harmen. "Only, mother says we can't accept a present from Blass. She is right."

"So!—" He glanced from one to the other, thus banded against him. "And why not from Blass?"

"He is a stranger. I had no idea there was a mortgage. Nor had he."

"So! Nor had he!"

"Steven!" implored the wife.

"Mother is right," said Harmen, doggedly. He liked saying it.

The old man turned on her. "You can send the money to Carlina to-morrow," he cried. "To-morrow! If only you will declare to me that there never was anything between you and Govert Blass!"

She stood there, in her disordered garb, with the grey shawl about her. On her brow rested a radiance of matronly purity. In the cloud of her bright hair. In her sad eyes.

"But if not, it's the Lord's," cried old Steven. "I have given it Him. I have gotten it for Him. Every penny. You can't touch it. I mayn't touch it. Our

immortal souls daren't touch it! Answer! Don't you see that I must have an answer? I must!"

She had closed her eyes, against his vehemence. She opened them, in the full light.

"I was engaged, once, to marry him," she said. "I broke it off."

Steven fell back. "You never told me?"

"No. He went to Transvaal. I married you."

"There is nothing else? Nothing more?"

Her white skin mantled slowly a dark crimson. She stood looking at him with tremulous lips.

"Leave us! Go upstairs!" Steven pointed his son to the steps.

Harmen took a stride forwards. "Mother!"

She hearkened once more. "Yes, leave us," she pleaded eagerly. "Go, dear, if you love me. Nay, go." She waited till the cellar door had closed on him; then she turned to her husband. "I will answer no more questions," she said. "Do with your money as you will."

"You have answered," he said brokenly. "We are beggared."

She approached him; she clasped her hands. "Spare me!" she prayed. "Trust me a little longer. You have trusted me so long."

"Too long," he said, retreating. "Did I know of your engagement to this man, whom you called a stranger? You have deceived me." He swept round towards the steps.

"Help me!" she said. "Help!"

"Are you innocent?"

She sank down on the damp soil, till her head touched her knees. Thus he left her.

She lifted her bare arms round the open green door. On the barrel lay the untouched treasure.

Harmen stood hesitating in the passage.

"Go back to your bed," said his father. "She will not see you again to-night. Go to your bed, I bid you. To-morrow there will be work enough."

"To-morrow is Sunday," said Harmen.

"Ay; the Lord's day for the Lord's work. Go!"

The life-habit of obedience was strong in Harmen. He climbed to his garret. Its window was dark. The moon had gone down, and long-threatened storm-clouds were gathering. Everything was silent outside. He was young. He was dead tired. He lay tossing to right and left.

CHAPTER XIV

HE leapt away from his thoughts with the first glimmerings of the dawn. Thank God for the curse of Adam, if man is to dwell outside Paradise! Whatever work of the Lord's might be coming to him on the Lord's day, Harmen had all the usual labour of the little farm on his hands to begin with. As he went to get his things for the milking, he noticed that the corpse of the dead cow was covered with flies. There was a dirty task awaiting him here, a repulsive task. He went out first to the live cattle, lowing in the field.

The air was still cool and pearly, with broad dew. Wisps of grey mist lay about the long stretch of pale green. And in the west, beyond the summer twitterings, a great bank of blue-black muttered to itself and played.

Harmen met the mildly alarmed gaze of "Apple-Blossom." It was his mother who gave these fantastic names to their few cows. The father spoke of "the brown 'un," "last year's," and so on.

"No fear!" said Harmen to Apple-Blossom. "Not every storm kills a cow; and if it did, that cow needn't be you."

Best of all his farm work he liked milking, the purity of it, the energetic repose. The touch of the clean hands on the cleansed dugs, the rhythmical spurt of the milk, with its musical fall, cream-white on cream. The calm freshness of the half-awakened day, in immensities of silence and sleepy meditation. And the thought of the relief brought to those patient purveyors of man's

most innocent nourishment. Why, even the fruit that we eat, we bite into it, and crush it. But we draw the milk from the mooing cattle, and they bless us as we drink.

Like most peasants, Harmen didn't touch milk, except in his tea and coffee, and his porridge; but that's neither here nor there. Nor did he sentimentalize about chewing apples or threshing corn; but that's neither there nor here.

He sat enjoying his milking, and talking, as ever, to the quadruped. The customary labour brought him a much-needed quiescence. Storms pass over, as he had reminded Apple-Blossom. Father had an enormous, an astounding, sum of money in his possession. Presently he would clear up the clouds. And where money is, there is an arrangement of money-difficulties. Surely it would be absurd to imagine anything else. Like a jump into a ditch whilst your jumping-pole lies on the bank!

"The calf's dead," he said to the next cow, inclined to be frisky and whisky — characteristics all very well in their proper place, as indicative of good health and animal spirits, but ridiculously incongruous in connection with pails. "'Twasn't your calf, so you needn't pull a face. Your calf's all right. But Long Katrine's dead too, and you'll miss her, though you won't know why."

"You can tell," said the cow, whom Jennie called "Sad-Eye," "neither what I remember nor what I foresee."

It was his mother who had first suggested to his unreflecting intelligence that animals might possibly experience some other emotion than physical pleasure or pain. He had never forgotten the moment — now half a dozen years ago; it had coloured his whole par-

ticipation in the life of the stock — and the poultry-yard. She had stood with him one dark evening watching the cat searching for her drowned kittens, whilst Poker, who had been present at the drowning, looked on, amused.

“Do you think they can tell each other anything?” she had said. There is no answer. Let us hope they cannot. All the telling would be of the cruelties of nature. And of nature’s antagonist, man.

He began whistling softly, as he worked. His peace of mind had returned to him, in this Sabbath stillness. He moved amongst the animals, with a pat and a strong word, a laugh and a push. The dog Poker, the mongrel Dutch Shepherd, ran up snuffing and, true to his vocation, poked his nose into the master’s hand.

“Why, Poker, I thought you had gone off to Carlina!” exclaimed Harmen. That was a joke, for Carlina had scalded Poker. He bears the mark between his thick fur to this day. She had declared that a sheep-dog had no business on a sheepless farm.

“And what business have you here?” her infuriated nephew had demanded. His father had boxed his ears.

“More business than *you!*” old Steven, half-frightened, had snapped at him. The boy, dazed, had pressed the poor pup against his flaming cheek.

“Come along, old fellow!” he now said, as he went back, through the dew and the gathering gloom, to the stable. “The rain isn’t good for your rheumatiz.” But the beast refused to seek his basket in the kitchen; he rubbed up against his master’s legs, whilst avoiding the swing of the pails.

Whistling still — an old psalm tune — Harmen settled down to the less agreeable labour of skinning the dead cow. The change in the weather had rendered imperative a work already delayed. The flies were all-per-

vading, obnoxious. He drew Poker close beside him. "Whisk!" he said, as you start a machine. Poker had a very bushy tail.

When he glanced up disgusting, disgusted, his bared arms full of blood and smears, his whole aspect unpleasing in his surroundings of sight, sound, and smell, he beheld his mother standing, in her spruce Sunday clothes, white and sweet, at the entrance.

She drew near to him. "I suppose that couldn't wait?" she said. "Father would have done it yesterday; only there was so much else."

"You and father seem to have done pretty well all there was to do," he said, wiping his hot face with his raised shirt-sleeve. "I'll be in presently, mother; don't you stop here."

"No, I want to stop here, and to talk to you."

"But the smell turns you sick."

"Not if I won't let it. Look at Poker!"

Poker, his back to the scene of interest, his tail wagging, understood that he was being cited as an example of rectitude and, half turning his narrow head, winked.

"I want to say something, at once, whilst we are alone," continued Vrouw Jennie, eagerly. "Your father is going to speak to you after breakfast, Harmen — I don't quite know what he is going to ask of you — something great, I fancy — I fear — but you must do it. You must do it, Harmen. Be sure, if he asks it, it is right. He is a great man, is your father, Harmen, a good man. Perhaps we haven't always felt that enough. Perhaps I haven't always told you enough. You and I are just ordinary human creatures, Harmen, but your father is — is a man that does right."

"Yes," said Harmen, bending low over the carcase and tearing a great fragment sideways, "I believe he is.

But you, when you do a thing, it is right, because you do it."

"Oh, Harmen!" she faltered, and shrank away, involuntarily, from the bloody mass.

"If you did a wrong thing — a thing you thought wrong, I mean," persisted Harmen, "it would be right because you did it. There, don't talk, mother! Go away from here. Whatever you tell me to do, I'll do."

"Oh, not that — not that!" she cried; her words burnt in her eyes, on her lips. "Not love, when we think it is right only, but love, when we know it is wrong! You must love me, whatever happens. Harmen, only love me! That is what I've come to ask. Do what your father says, because we respect him; but love me! I'm not righteous like father. You must obey father; you must follow father! But love me."

The rain splashed outside in its first great, heavy patters. The clouds lay dark against the stable windows. The far lions of the tempest roared to be let loose.

"Now, look here, motherkin; was there ever a time, when you thought I didn't love you? Say!"

"Not enough," she said. "I am intemperate. I have never had enough. And I live in fear of less."

"Well, I can't make pretty speeches, like you, mother. I'm not a town-child like you. All I can say is I love you as much as — as the Boer-woman loves heat."

"The Boer-woman! — what Boer-woman? Ah, yes! I could share your love with another woman; I am not as bad as that."

"You haven't been tried," he laughed good-humouredly, kindly. "And there isn't much danger for the present."

"Harmen, was his niece as beautiful as her song?"

He flushed with annoyance. "Don't mention her here," he said. "I mean, not the singing." He flung away a great strip. "Faugh! I'm through, mother. Run away back. Why, it's pelting. Wait a minute: I'll get you your things." He washed and went to the house for her cloak, and umbrella and clogs. And in the white down-pour, with a piece of sacking thrown over him, he dug amidst the roar and the rush and the flame-fire, his heart and lips alive with fierce mutterings, he dug and he dug, as if the deep clay were sand sprinklings, the swift grave of Long Katrine. More judicious than he, the dog Poker attended the funeral under cover of an adjacent muck-heap. The dog dropped his ears. Did he dislike the noise and wet of the thunderstorm? Or is it thinkable that he should reflect on the possibility of dogs having burials, like cows!

When Harmen entered the living-room he found that his parents had finished their breakfast. They sat silent, apart. Neither looked at him.

"Good morning," said the father, over a lighted pipe.

The young man ate a few mouthfuls. He pushed away his plate.

"Well?" he said. And he sought his father's eyes — in vain.

"It is this," said Steven, raising his voice above the rain. "Your mother and I are agreed. We have talked it over. We understand each other. We are agreed."

Jennie's lips trembled. She took up her knitting, then remembered the Sunday, and put it down again.

"You must not ask us much," she said. "Not more than we have asked each other. You must trust us."

The old man intervened. "Let me speak," he said, with a stroke of his fist. "See here, son; here is the

money!" And suddenly he drew the whole heap from his side-pocket and flung it, with a fling as if it were red-hot, on the table; it fell over Harmen's plate. "You can have it if you like. You can do with it what you like. But I will not touch it. For it isn't mine. It's God's."

"God's got a lot more," said Harmen.

"Hush, he cannot understand like that, Steven," put in the wife.

"Give me time," said Steven, with beetling brows. "Harmen, I am an old man. I — though I say it to my own son — I haven't always been a good man. I don't believe in your easy religion that takes all and gives nothing for Jesus' sake. It isn't in the Bible! It's debtor and creditor in the Bible. As ye sow, so shall ye reap. And, when I started keeping house, I said, Life's short, death's eternal.—If there's a debt to the Lord at the end, we'll pay," He drew a long breath, two slow whiffs of his pipe. "I began putting by the money from that moment. Saved it out of our mouths, bit by bit, coin by coin. We had the good years then, you remember, wife! — with the big English prices; still you can imagine, Harmen, what a struggle it was! Then the legacy helped, from my aunt; there the money is — oof! it's there." He sat staring. The lightning flared across the room.

"The debt's there too," he said.

"Ah!" exclaimed the wife. A clap of thunder had shaken the house.

The eyes of wife and husband met. The son's, unable to reach them, dropped moodily towards the plate.

"The debt's there too," repeated Steven. "But see here, Harmen, we're ruined. The farm's going. I'm old and done for. It looks as if I was paying the debt with your money, not mine."

Harmen glanced up quickly.

"And perhaps, besides," said the old man, rising, bent, "it's all an error! Perhaps there isn't any God on the other side! Your mother says often it looks as if there wasn't any here."

"No—hush!—oh, I'm a wicked woman!" broke from the agonized Vrouw. The rain smote in great blobs against the panes.

"What fools we should prove then?" said old Steven, grimly. "But it isn't true, boy: there *is* a God. And He casts into prison, till the uttermost farthing be paid."

The woman drew out her pocket-handkerchief and covered her face.

"I—I want to pay my debt," said the old man, examining, yet not seeing his square boot-tips. "It's *my* debt, you understand that, Harmen. My debt."

"What debt?" said Harmen with a rush. His heart thumped.

"*My* debt! *My* debt!"—Stephen put out his arm to check, or to ward off, his wife. "Silence! You understand that. Ask no more. *My* expiation. *My* sin-offering. It's always been that. Mine. Mine only. Promised by *me!*" He rose to his feet. "But look here, Harmen, it's not fair *now*. It's waited too long. I'm an old man. You're young. Life's before you. The farm's yours in the future. It's my debt; and you pay!"

There was a long pause. Not of silence, with the tempest and crash of the clouds.

Harmen looked up, round the whole familiar room.

"If I'm young, I can work," he said. His look and his voice were greatly troubled. He could demand no further confession than his father had vouchsafed. The letters z, o, e, n stand for "kiss" in his language; they stand for "atonement" as well.

"Look here, father," he said, "seems to me you don't leave me much choice!"

"I leave you every choice. The money is yours—take it!"—Steven stretched out a shaking hand—"I can't even see it. I don't want to see it. I tell you the thing isn't fair. It has slipped from me. It has lasted too long. I—I—something's wrong with me, not my eyes only. It's yours now, the farm is. You're going to live on it, not I. When I go up yonder,"—he pointed—"I shall tell Him so. 'Twasn't me Thou wert ruining,' I shall say, 'twas *him!*'" He turned almost angrily on Harmen. "Why, a fool'd understand that!" he cried.

"I don't want the beastly farm," said Harmen, "with the beastly name."

The Vrouw lifted her head anxiously.

"It's all foolishness, perhaps," Steven insisted. "The wife thinks, I believe, that it's foolishness: we're not agreed in that. Perhaps God doesn't want us to pay Him. Perhaps we needn't. Perhaps He's all love and forgiveness, as your mother thinks. Pay thy vows to the Most High, it says: doesn't it? But, Jennie, we've no right to ruin Harmen. My God, how true it says that it's better not to vow than not to pay! But *you* needn't trouble about that, Harmen, because it's your future and your money—it isn't your vow and your debt. And it may be foolishness, and—my God!—there may be no God!"

"Mother!" said Harmen. "Look at me. Do you think it is foolishness?"

But she closed her eyes. "No," she whispered under her breath.

Harmen swept up the notes in one wide sweep. "How do you pass these on to the Lord?" he said. His voice rang out, with a fierce rush of emotion, pressed back.

— said Harriet. "We were very one
another." "I am a murderer," said Harriet. He
laughed at this name. His parents
had given him a real name. Father!
Mother! He had given up the science of
languages and the usual denominations

— "I am a murderer. You are free
to be with me. I don't understand
you. You are a man's risen face
in the world of the dead."

"I am a murderer" — he going to
the door — "I will be your
murderer — not mine."

"Murderer! What is awful living! Hell!
I am not living. He says. God says,
you are living. You may be in them
now or coming to Harriet: he was
going to living for ever and ever! Oh,
what living! The old voice broke in

the shriek: he mumbled, “‘ What shall it profit a man?’ I — I — it isn’t mine. It never was mine. I gave it to Him.”

“ All that money?” said Harmen, looking down at the bundle in his hands.

“ Only take it away! Take it out of the house!” He put forth both his quivering hands. “ I don’t ask what becomes of it. Never let me see it. Never let me hear of it again!”

Harmen turned away from them, with a jerk, but his mother followed him. She put her arms around his neck in the passage. She kissed his hot cheek. “ He is right — oh, so right!” she sobbed. “ That is what I wanted to tell you. I am wrong. I am wrong.”

“ It means ruin,” he said. “ Just when I thought we were saved.” And he kissed her.

She returned to her husband. Steven had sunk into his chair, but he straightened himself. “ Are you content?” he said.

She could not reply.

“ I mean, you feel that I couldn’t have acted different?”

“ Different?” She made as if she would have caught his hand and kissed it. “ You are the noblest, the noblest of men.”

But he drew away the hand. “ Keep your own counsel,” he said gruffly. “ And I shall keep mine.” He hesitated. “ No,” he said, “ I don’t know your secret. I don’t want to know it. I mayn’t know it. Not in this world. Right so. You must never tell me anything. Not anything more. You owe me that. You owe me that.” He also passed into the turmoil of the elements, bare-headed, without even a piece of sackcloth upon his bent back.

CHAPTER XV

THE rain had stopped. But the world all around was alive with the noise of ten thousand falling drops. They glistened everywhere in the sunlight that came breaking from a pellucid sky, broad sheets of it, and sparkles, against a receding pall. The scared birds, regaining courage, twittered under the eaves and the leaves, in the dripping damps and about the pools that filled the farm-yard, dozens of feathery flutters, hunting for washed-up worms.

Harmen let himself down, like a prison-breaker, off the roof, at the end of the long barn. His parents were making themselves spruce for their immutable session in the village church.

He slipped away through the orchard. His mother, whilst all laughed at her whim that "the miasms from the apple-field were poisonous,"—Carlina laughed rudely — his mother had got him to shut out the view by a rough line of white may and white roses. "*You* plant them," she had pleaded. From the house one could see the great masses of blossom, hanging pure.

He walked to the inn, to Vulsevol's. There he would find Freckles, the mare, and drive her to Vrederust. His heart was full of dull anger. Against God.

Against the God, whoever He is, who puts thoughts of fear and horror into the tormented lives of men. The God who sees men suffer and tells them they will suffer more. The God, whose heaven-sent word, throughout the ages, has brought that look into loving women's faces, those words into the mouths of righteous men.

This was the God of his up-bringing, his surroundings, the God of his fathers, his father's God. Every morning, every evening, before work and after, the hard bread from heaven had mingled with the coarse bread of earth. Father read, from the Old Testament chiefly, commination by preference, every evening, every morning, like most men of his kind and of his child-memories. Harmen repeated a few words that were not even a mechanical prayer. But his life was unavoidably blackened by the dull thought of "the Lord." In the trouble that had suddenly ruffled its repose he had naturally cried out to the Almighty, certain tyrant and possible helper. He had believed in the reply, at Lievendaal: he had rejoiced in it. Now he struggled, bewildered, caught by the Fowler in His net.

This was Father's religion, the religion of your childhood. You never needed it until you were in trouble; then it thickened the haze.

It was like Father to worry and torment himself — what about? Harmen believed him to feel most inevitable remorse at having ruined the whole life of his only sister, by keeping her from marrying and telling her she was penniless. These last weeks had brought home the brother's cruelty; Carlina snatched at wedlock, however unsuitable, however superannuated, at any price. The life of Steven, then, had been a long course of deceit and injustice, to retain "Eben-Haëzar." As a punishment God took it from him at the close. Doubtless he had promised to "atone" if her marriage ever proved him in the wrong. He now accepted the punishment, working out his own salvation. This Harmen could understand, could explain to himself; he clung to it. The outbreak against mother, the attempt to find grave fault in her also, these were in keeping with Steven's whole temperament, all long strain and

sudden flash. Harmen could make large filial allowance for his father, because of the great difference in their characters. When a man was so religious as father, he naturally did wrong with a very heavy heart.

It was nine o'clock in the morning. There remained an hour until church-time. Harmen felt the pressure of the bulging packet in his breast-pocket. He must make up his mind what to do with it. Well, here was Vulsevol's place, drowsy with the dingy boredom of a tavern after Saturday night. The garrulous inn-keeper must be babbling round the corner. Harmen pushed open the stable-door, to find Freckles whinnying a welcome from Blass's well-littered private box.

He talked to her as usual, telling her half a dozen things she really had no business to know. The other occupants of the stable — a couple of poor over-driven animals and a goat — attempted to look superciliously indifferent to personal intercourse of any kind with that brute — all three knew him for a brute — man.

“ You! ” said a loud voice. “ Why, I thought it was Blass! ” The landlord had bustled in, attracted by Freckles' call. He now trotted up and down, also neighing (a very poor imitation), for such was his idea of wit. Even the pitying gaze of the mare over her pretty neck did not disturb him. He went to draw a blind in the twilight; a watery ray caught his rubicund dot of a nose. “ Though why should it be Blass? ”

“ Yes, I thought it was Blass! ” cackled the portly landlord, leaving off neighing to bray. “ Only, he was here last night, at his usual hour, and he saw your horse in the stall there. ‘ A neat little creature,’ he says. ‘ Pols's, isn't she? Put her in my box, when I'm gone; she'll be more comfortable there.’ That's what he says, or I shouldn't never have done it! Comfortable she has been, and she eats more than I got at her age.”

"You shouldn't have moved her," said Harmen, wrathfully. "Not after I was gone. I'm no believer in boxes." He couldn't endure the thought; he led the mare out of the little pitch-pine boudoir into the common shed. Freckles, quickly observant, sulked.

"Well, I never!" said the landlord, open-mouthed.

"We don't need a rich man's charity," grumbled Harmen. "Freckles and I!"

"Well, I — envy!" exclaimed Vulsevol. "Wicked, sinful envy! You go and hear parson preach about coveting, Harmen Pols! He preached about it all last Sunday, because his wife's got her new summer hat. Leastways, they told me so. I don't go. I've no sins that I know of, for him to preach against. Except my two glasses a day, or maybe three, which he calls a sin, but they isn't. But they do say the hat is too smart. Five feathers! Four children on her hands and five feathers on her head!"

"Poor thing! they do worry her so," remarked Harmen, stroking Freckles.

"Oh, she worries them in her turn. When you're as old as I, you'll never pity a woman that isn't dumb. My wife says, talking's my sin. But it isn't talking that's sinning, it's sinning in your talk. Now *your* sin's envy. Have a glass of gin?"

"It's too early," said Harmen. "Help me get the chaise."

Baas Vulsevol complied with pleasing alacrity. He possessed the attractive quality of pretending to push when anything heavy came along, of pretending to hurry when someone else was making haste. He could even pretend, at a stretch, to perspire. But in reality he went his own peaceful way and never did anything that any one else could do without him. Therefore he ate, drank and slept. Also he talked, whilst he ate, between his

drinks, and in his sleep. Men liked him universally, and considered him exceedingly unselfish and obliging. He was lord of a wife and two daughters, worn to the bone.

"Well, well, there's no pleasing some people. I acted for the best," he expostulated, with one gentle hand at the back of the chaise. "Weren't you afraid she wouldn't be comfortable? You've your father's character — don't grow cantankerous. I've always thought you a good sort, Harmen Pols." He went on complaining, for he couldn't stomach a word of blame.

"All right, I suppose it was stupid of me," admitted Harmen, abashed.

"Your own enemy, nobody else's! I prefer smooth-spoken folks, like myself. Live and let live. Help your neighbour; don't envy him. 'Put her in my box,' says Govert Blass."

"He meant it kindly," granted Harmen, whirling the chaise round.

Mine host jumped aside; it had nearly crossed his toes. "How violent you are!" he remonstrated. "Roel Slink was here last night — your uncle, he! he! — and stayed late. 'Harmen isn't half bad, but he's violent,' said Roel."

"Slink was here?" repeated Harmen, with knit brows.

"Yes, your uncle — ha! ha! There, you needn't look as if you wanted to eat me. I'm raw."

"Like your gin," said Harmen in a flash, feeling as if he could gladly have punched the head of the whole human race.

"He was here, treating his old friends, and not in a hurry to get back to his fair Carlina. He told some racy stories about her I shan't repeat to you; you're too violent. I shan't help you, man, if you pull such

wicked faces!" — he took his two fingers from the shaft. "We've had thunder enough for one Sabbath. 'Go home,' says I to Roel. 'Not till she's asleep,' says he. 'You'll let me have a fly she shall pay for,' says he."

"I can't find the head-stall," said Harmen.

"Why, there it is in front of you. It was Roel who said to me, you had such a look of Govert Blass. 'He's not like him in character, I should imagine,' says Roel, 'but he's like him in a look he has, or in features, or something; don't you think so?' says Roel. That's what Roel says, and I must admit, it had never occurred to me. 'Nonsense,' says I, but he sets me wondering. And there — la! — I come in this morning, in the dark, not thinking of anything Roel had said, you can believe me, and — hang me, if I didn't cry out it was Blass, when of course, now, how could it be? So there must be something in it, a deal more than I thought. True, I didn't see much more than your cap!"

"Does Blass ever wear a cap?" questioned Harmen, strapping the traces.

"Not as I knows on. Still, he's a sensible fellow. I know the sort, when I meets with 'em. Seeing as I'm one myself."

"True," said Harmen. "Well, then, answer a sensible question. Did Roel Slink make these sensible remarks, with 'Jack and Everyman' standing by to hear?"

"He did not. He said it to me only, standing here, looking at your horse."

"And you repeated it, as is your sensible habit, all over the place?" He was too angry to measure his courtesy.

"My habit! My sensible habit!" bridled Vulsevol. "My habit, Harmen Pols, is neither to be an ass my-

self, nor to fancy, as asses do, that every one else is! That's my habit. Go to church! I repeated it to nobody. To nobody but Govert Blass."

"Oh!" said Harmen, sweeping up the reins.

"Govert Blass said he didn't know you, and I told him you had started off to see him. That seemed to disturb him rather, and he hurried away home."

"I don't wonder he hurried away!" the young man retorted grimly. "Gee up, old girl! You tell people I'm like Govert Blass, Vulsevol! Keep up your reputation for common-sense! Right so!" The last words he shouted, looking backwards, as Freckles pranced away into the sunshine and the steam.

The placid spires and chimneys of Vrederust spread before him in a mist of repose. Nature was resting, like man, from the heat which works and works itself up till it bursts. The bells rang out from one of the two rival religious establishments; the other moodily waited its turn.

"So far, so good," said Harmen, when he had again stabled his horse; he hung over the parapet, idly gazing into the oily canal. All the way from the village to the town he had realized nothing but his fury against Vulvesol. Now that sank. Let a fool babble foolishness, being thereunto born. These pot-companions in the public-houses drop words as a baby drops slaver! Why not say that Roel Slink has a look of Steven Pols?

He leant over the iron railing, staring down into the motionless water. The little grass-grown streets of Vrederust, washed and aired, with their low, green-shuttered houses, lay motionless also, except for an occasional pedestrian, hastening, Sunday-garbed, to service or holiday. The whole empty place, that dreams on week-days, slept its Sabbath sleep. Outwardly, for in

the breasts of the church-goers flamed, as during the days of the Spaniards, the quenchless fire of religious zeal. Not a soul in Holland but finds its deepest passion in religious heat. The Catholics in fierce hate of the Protestant, the Protestants in weird thought on damnation, the Socialists in parched thirst for non-existent wealth. The Socialists render Catholics and Protestants miserable, the Catholics only the Protestants, the Protestants themselves. Of Catholics Harmen knew little, except that he believed they would rather have starved than buy cheese from him: of Socialists he knew only that they wanted other people's money, which he didn't: of Protestants he knew a painful deal. He was a Church-member. He went to Sunday Synagogue, unless one of the live-stock had hopped into a ditch.

And now! He took out the parcel he had brought thus far and held it in his hand over the water. He pinched it between finger and thumb. He would gladly have loosed his hold ever so slightly. He stood there, ashamed of his thought.

"I see you!" said the shrill voice of Miss Mia. He recognized it with a start that clinched all his strong fingers round the parcel. The "little" maid of Aunt Josabé and Deborah, condemned to be everlasting little, because condemned to be everlasting cheap. Miss Mia of the big limbs and baby lips (when dumb) expressed such lively interest in this encounter as her rest-day finery would allow. Her extreme aptitude for nodding (especially when in conversation with gentlemen) was much modified by her consciousness of plumes. Needless to say that these concomitants of female deterioration wheedled from Aunt Josabé, could only be assumed, like Indian war-paint, on the warpath. And the warpath was round the corner. The little maid remarked: "Don't I look smart?"

"I hope your mother hasn't sneezed," answered Harmen.

This retort was to the pert young lady's taste. She replied —

"Don't, please, drop that package while I'm looking. I should have to give evidence."

Harmen leant with his back against the railing and studied her. He was speculating, dully, whether this not unpleasing sort had a soul also, like his father, and what a farce the whole eternal responsibility must be.

"Do you want to pierce right through into my chest?" she questioned suddenly. He reddened. "Just as I want to know what's in that parcel," she said. "But we can't."

"Old papers," he said brusquely.

She laughed, far too loud. "Are there no canals at your place?" She saw well how she annoyed him. "I do enjoy a good teaze," she said; "and I can only teaze Deborah and you."

"You teaze Cousin Deborah? I thought it was the other way round."

"*Teaze* her!" screamed Miss Mia. "I teaze her all day. In everything I say, and in everything I do. I couldn't live there an hour, if I didn't teaze her! Teaze her? I teaze her by saying her pills don't work — when they do."

"Well, you shan't teaze me. I wasn't going to throw this over the parapet."

"I shan't teaze you, because I don't want to," replied Mia, coolly. "I rather love you. That's why that parcel drives me wild. Love-letters, of course."

"Well, then, not yours, in any case!"

"Besides, I can't stand a closed parcel. I must get inside. Yesterday I poked my fingers through one. Face-powder in it for old Josabet!"

"What happened to you then?" He felt he could only humour her, and slowly push her off.

"I licked it all off the carpet before Deborah came in."

Harmen put the package in his breast-pocket. "Going to church?" he said negligently. "Isn't it about time?"

But she stuck. "Catch me," was her reply. "I'm supposed to be in church, mind you, if Deborah were to ask. I always have to tell her the text — blow it and her! It costs me a ha'porth of snuff."

"Huh!"

"An old neighbour of mother's *always* goes. I have to buy the text of her for a ha'porth of snuff."

"She remembers it right?"

"No, she gets it all wrong, always, but it does for old Deborah. I told her I wouldn't learn it. Told her I'd rather take two pills."

"Did she give 'em to you?"

"No. Pills cost money. Texts don't. Not her. Me they cost a ha'porth of snuff," said Miss Mia, aggrieved.

"Do the others go? What church?"

"Deborah goes. You wouldn't expect Roel. Your aunt said she'd take her first holiday. Said it was her first holiday in all these twenty years. Said 'I didn't go before I was *ten*.'" Miss Mia shrieked.

"Yes," acquiesced Harmen. "And what church does Deborah go to?"

"Gracious! what do you care?" said the horrid, cute thing. "Are you so 'straordinary anxious to see her? One'd think you was her lover; that's why young men go to church." She poked out her tawdry parasol.

"Those her letters?"

"Oh, shut up!" said Harmen. "To which church has she gone?"

"Give me a kiss, and I won't split about that parcel!"

He shuddered away from her, as far as he could against the railing. "Oh, shut up!" he said. His mien and his tone showed such undisguised disgust that she caught fire.

"You kissed me yesterday! Twice!" she said, with heat.

"Yesterday wasn't to-day."

"What's the difference? Sunday? You hypocrite!" she screamed. How shrill her voice was! How ugly is a woman's ugly voice!

"What church has Deborah gone to? I want to know!" His eyes threatened her; she liked him thus.

"Kiss me, and I'll tell you!" she answered, advancing her pale face.

"Oh, hang it!" he said, touching her cheek.

"She goes to the new church, because she's got a front seat there, where people can see her nod 'yes' and 'no'!"

"Thanks!" said Harmen. "And the church you go to?"

"Oh, good-bye," she retorted. "The church I go to is waiting round the corner. It doesn't make such a fuss as you do about a poor little kiss. And I'll pay you out the moment I can, for being so secret about that parcel!" She bounced away, with offended skips and sniffs. Harmen dawdled off towards the Old Church. It stands on the Market, grey and hoary. It was desolate, watchful as a light-tower, its wide beach of grey flagstones still untouched by the gathering tide.

At the corner of the Market dwelt "Old Suerus." Already Old Suerus, brushed and barbered, sat by his little window, with the little spy-glass outside. The Christian Sabbath was inexpressibly tedious to Old Suerus, but he got up early, simply because he couldn't stand the way his wakeful brain dreamed of money-

making, when in bed. And he made so little money! Once out of the dream-state, up and alert, he didn't care to make it.

He sat in his widowed loneliness, with his cup of coffee, facing Socrates. The dog, being a Gentile, was not debarred, like his master, from having buttered bread in his Sunday milk. Old Suerus, opening his stuffy window, hailed Harmen with delight. The latter realized that the half-dozen people he knew amongst the few thousands of Vrederust were all going to espy him before he hid in the crowded church.

"Church?" echoed Suerus. "That's right. You're too early. I wish I was going to church."

"No synagogue?" said Harmen, moving from foot to foot.

"Never. I go fishing instead. It isn't breaking my Sabbath; I never catch anything."

"But yesterday you were selling!"

"So I was. I had fished in the morning, I hadn't caught anything. I don't keep these festivals. On your Sundays I read philosophy. Spinoza. You never heard of him. Look at Socrates! He's heard of him. See him cock up his ears? Spinoza to him means a bit of raw liver. We keep Spinoza's birthday, and Socrates has liver and beans. We keep a dozen more such birthdays; these are my holidays! I eat little. But all the philosophers mean bodily food to Socrates. I hardly dare speak of them. I wish I hadn't mentioned that name just now. I *can't* give him raw liver at this hour!" Suerus sighed, and remained much distressed. He leant out of the window as far as he could go. "Good dog, Sock! Forget him! Look round the corner! Cats! hi!" He rose wearily. "It's no use. I must go now and get him a bit."

He burst out at himself, vindictively. "You idiot!"

The lad's never even heard of — of Plato! What's Plato — eh?"

"A dog's name," answered Harmen, boldly. "Like Socrates."

"He means Pluto!" Suerus nodded to Socrates, and Socrates nodded back. But the nod of Socrates signified: "You said cheese." "Look here, Pols, let me bring you a book — a little popular book — a child could understand it — about philosophy. A quarter! Twenty-five cents! One small quarter! Eh! Be a man, not an animal. Say — a little book — a quarter!"

"What should I do with a book about fill-her-sophy?" queried Harmen in doubt.

"What?" cried the Jew. He caught at his grizzly beard; the black eyes gleamed in his orange-tinted death-mask. "What do I do, when I trudge along the roads in all weathers, selling folks things they don't want to buy? What's life, eh, when you can't go to church, unless you've philosophy? A bad joke. A bad practical joke, played by a big boy on a very little one. That's what life is!" He lifted a brown book off the sill and shook it at the young peasant. "Kant —"

Socrates barked.

"Yes, Sock; you shall have the sugar! And the liver! And the cheese! Only let me speak, or this lad's necessity will choke me. His need's greater than yours, Sock! Kant has *proved*, Harmen Pols, that we can't live on physical food alone!" He brandished the brown volume in Harmen's face.

"What's 'physical'?" asked Harmen. "Look here, talking of books, I've got a message for you, Suerus, from the girl — the young lady at Lievendaal. I'm to pay you for the shoes you — left behind you. But I haven't got any money." Nothing could have brought home to him more clearly the fact of his impersonal con-

nection with his old father's soul-concerns. He pressed his arm against the parcel.

"I haven't any money. You must make me out a bill."

"I approve of that girl," said Suerus.

"And about the books — I must take her, in secret, the two you wanted her to read."

"You see her in secret?"

Harmen scowled. "Her uncle mustn't know, or you'll get into trouble. Can you give me the books?"

Suerus fetched from under a couple of dusty Indian shawls — his whole den was piled up with incongruous rubbish — two neat volumes of a popular library. He placed them before Harmen.

"Half a guilder each," he said, "and each worth its weight in gold." The books were "Vanity Fair" and "David Copperfield." He stood looking at them for a moment; then he suddenly put away "Vanity Fair" behind his back. "No," he said, "take her the other one only. She can look at good and evil through the pink glass first." He laughed to himself. "Later on, when she's married, she may look through the grey."

"I wish you'd talk Dutch," said Harmen, irritably. "What am I to tell her?"

"Tell her she'll learn all she need know from this!" The Jew held up the volume of Dickens. "Six years hence I shall sell her this"—he showed a tip of the book behind his back. "She's lonely out there, with that Boer brute; some nice man should make love to her."

"Is that fill-of-sophy?" demanded the incensed youth.

"Indeed it is. The only philosophy for those who can understand no other. See *my* book here!" He snatched up the brown volume. "This man shows you that, in all things, you may because you must, and you must because you may. When you understand *that*, you

don't need novels nor love-making. Your life becomes as that of a god!" The nasal twang caught a sudden thrill of beauty from the words. "But you don't understand a syllable!"

"Not I," said Harmen, uncomfortable and contemptuous. "Here, hand me the other book — her book! The bell's tolling."

"True. As long as you can go to church, you've no need of Kant or Hegel. Coming, Sock, coming! Down, dog! Be a philosopher! Now, a little book, Pols — one quarter! — for the day when you come out of church and say: 'I'll never go in again.'" The Jew bent from the window, with kindly wheedlings, watching his visitor out. A few stragglers churchwards turned to raise a scornful lip.

"I couldn't go to a synagogue, if there was one," said Suerus. "My old uncle went, but, then, he heard nothing. I fish and think. Some day you'll think. A little book, now? One quarter!"

"All right, if you like. I shan't read it. I don't mind one quarter."

"No, not if you won't read it. I cannot thus insult the great thinkers. Still, you seem a little wiser than Socrates. If he had a quarter, he would certainly spend it on — faugh! — sausage! Or does yours go in beer?"

"I haven't got too many quarters," called Harmen. Pressing his hand to his bosom, he entered the church. Old Suerus went to pay the patient Socrates his arrears of philosophers.

Harmen Pols carried away the unfathomable suggestion that a wise man doesn't require to believe in God.

"So much the better for the wise man; those who believe in God, He teases."

CHAPTER XVI

HARMEN sought a quiet gallery-seat, behind a pillar, in the slowly filling edifice. Like so many ancient Dutch churches of the pre-Reformation period, this one was too vast in size, and too cramped in seating power for the town about its feet. It was lofty and Gothic, intended for colour; it now stood gaunt and uncovered, with white windows, white walls. In its naked strength it had yet achieved a certain unchanging impressiveness, permeated, throughout its ordered vacuity, by the consciousness, to the sensuously sated, of a satisfying spiritual world. They who came here, in their thousands, to worship, could only come to worship in spirit.

The long lines of deal pews and straw chairs, fitted anyhow into transept and chancel, began rapidly to fill with sober-hued figures, scattered dots, as first seen from the gallery, but soon packed into a consolidated mass. All eyes were now turned to the waiting pulpit, against a stone pillar, under its wide-spread sounding-board. Without knowing it, Harmen had happened on a feast-day in Vrederust. A new parson was to be inducted under circumstances not devoid of dramatic interest. All the public dramas of these people were religious. For politics they cared not a jot.

Since time immemorial — a quarter of a century — the driving power in the Protestant world of this little community had been Dominé — that is Parson — Aegidius. A roughly hewn giant, with head thrown back and eyes uplifted. A man admired of the sisters and re-

spected by the brethren. A voice that swept into corners and swept out the dirt.

Suddenly, one morning, the news had spread, in a flutter round spinster breakfast tables, that Dominé Aegidius lay speechless, motionless, struck down. The blow had fallen silently at night, while he slept, an effusion of blood in the brain. After months of sympathetic assistance he recovered sufficiently to drag after him, with two sticks, his shrunk limbs, and to contort, in barely distinguishable sounds, his drawn lips. This was all that science and intercession had been able to do for him. Presently the thing would recur. Perhaps once, perhaps twice. Some day. Any day. He could get worse, but no better, till the end. The man of action had to face this prolonged public dying. He stumbled about the streets.

It was known in all Vrederust that he battled desperately against his arraignment of the God he had trusted and preached. It was known that he had doubt and agony in his heart, and faith and repentance and hope. His age was barely fifty: he felt entitled to twenty more years of combat against the rising powers of evil. He lay panting, with impotent fist, as they hurried on. He would willingly have fallen in the fight, but not thus. All his life as he fought he had asked of his Chief the swift death of a fighter; the answer was *this*. God mocked him. There are a hundred ways of killing a man. The one way he had dreaded was sent as a reply to his prayer.

Meanwhile, as he would be a long time about dying, a new minister had to be elected forthwith — appointments are unknown in the Reformed Church, outside the colonies. Over this vacancy a fierce conflict arose. For a certain party in the Council proved impatient of

Simon Aegidius' righteous domination, eager to be rid of it. These wanted a man of their own, a Latitudinarian. But the invalid's partisans, willing to do him more than a kindness, pushed in, shoulder to shoulder, young Peter, the parson's flaxen eldest, a boy, barely fit for the cure of a few dozen rustic souls in the back-woods. Every one understood why they had got him in; every one knew that the parson's household was a Tory theocracy with the parson as prophet. The speechless dictator could continue to rule, by dictation.

On this Sunday, then, three-quarters of Protestant Vrederust assembled to see the juvenile pastor inducted. Deborah was one of the determined absentees. She hated Aegidius with an unrelenting hate. He had remarked to her once, in his quietly conclusive manner, that the smallness of the mote in her eye was no excuse for the distinctness of the beams in the eyes of all other people. She, therefore, believed him to have committed every crime in her long calendar, and she said the mills of God ground exceedingly small.

Simon Aegidius had pleaded, with tears in his eyes, to induct Peter, his son. "Ah, you see!" said the opposition. His friends had managed to get this arrangement, disorderly as it was, permitted. The old man, quite disabled, would not preach the customary sermon; the two services, inductional and inaugural, must be blended into one.

When the ministers made their appearance to the swelling strains of the great organ, the old church was a vast sea of protruded faces, curiosity and pleasurable interest in almost every eye. The father tottered forward, his two sticks clicking. He hung sideways, like a tall, uprooted oak. The son followed, lithe and little, with blue eyes and baby forehead, in his bands and

Geneva gown. Disapproval, on the whole, met the son. Half the female congregation remembered him in swaddling clothes.

Harmen Pols gazed from his gallery corner. Well, he had come thus far. He must sit through the next two hours. His feelings were the least devotional possible. He was not sorry to find himself in for an extra show.

"I won't," he said, under his breath. "When the bag comes round, I'll go straight home, and tell father to do it himself. I won't. Why, the moment the thing drops into the bag, I'm a pauper! *I haven't wronged Carlina!*" Now yesterday, as he remembered with surprise, he had rather liked the idea, when he first set out to seek Roel, of becoming a penniless soldier of fortune, wearing a smart uniform, seeing broad life.

"I won't," he said.

The congregation sang, in slow torrents of sound. Harmen knew the Psalm by heart — he had learnt many psalms, at Carlina's insistence. His mother, when his father wasn't by, told him a fairy tale at the end of his task, as a reward.

The girl behind him sang very sweetly. But he thought what a difference there was in voices. Besides, church singing wasn't singing; it was church.

The former pastor — light and life of that great concourse during such a long succession of sabbaths — stammered a few scarcely audible words. They were understood to be a pitiful and almost irritable prayer. A protest as much as an appeal. A brief allocution was read for him by an elder. The son Peter, stood, pale and demure, with pink spots on his round, shaven cheeks.

Then followed the solemn service of the induction.

With the help of brother-clergy the sick man struggled on. Two of his college friends, in their prime of robust health, held his arms aloft, as he blest his successor. The congregation watched, half annoyed, half impressed. There remained a certain uncomfortable emotion that the world was managed wrong. It spread even amongst those who had come only to scoff at Peter, his school-friends, for instance. Pity for the pastor changed to indignation at the man's unreasonable fate. "Providence" is really too clumsy! Twenty years of usefulness lost!

"What's it all about?" questioned Harmen, hanging back behind his pillar. In a few words his neighbour told him. The great preacher struck down — you have heard his name? Yes, of course, and his boy-son put in, just a dummy. "Let us hope that the father'll write the sermons!" said the neighbour, a wizened little parrot-nosed creature, a cobbler and caviller in private life. Harmen shrugged his shoulders, rubbing his black head against the smutty chalk of the pillar. The whole business was indifferent to him; he wished they'd hurry up and pass the bag. He'd put in a brass cent and go home, tell his father his courage had failed him. God didn't want for money, besides.

"— will he give him a stone?" It was the voice of son Peter, clear, childish, but penetrating, reading out the text. The final words reached Harmen, drew his gaze down again. The boyish figure, the little white head with its fluffy curls, showed alone under the dark brown disc, in the tall pulpit. A youth, little older than Harmen, but looking younger, as a small, fair creature must, in comparison with a broad-shouldered dark one. The sermon began. The congregation settled down to it with a murmur; these people were accustomed to a

lunch-partitioned ceremony. The new teacher's (!) sample should have been spread out, for disapproval, in the empty afternoon.

"Will he give him a stone?" The words soared into the wide silence of the building. Line upon line, as packed pin-heads, the massed faces bent forward to listen. The cobbler's rapt attention caused Harmen to listen too.

"If he ask for bread, will he give him a stone?"

The boy's voice faltered; it could be seen that he was very nervous. But also that he was very determined, as one who stands, with his burnt ship behind him, at bay.

He had his sermon beneath his hand; he had it in that little round head; he had it on his lips.

"If he ask him for bread!" In quietly developed sentences, academically, he spoke of the natural, the righteous desire of the son, to the father, for bread. He spoke of its reiteration, its persistence, its acceptance and different treatment, by parents gentle or stern. Slowly the whole vast audience realized that he was speaking of fathers and sons.

Some few glanced with wonderment at the prominent seat, where Simon Aegidius rested. Was this homily already of his concocting, a lesson of the sapient treatment by fathers of their offspring, that grows up to be their glory and crown.

The son, from his elevation, gazing straight into the sunlight, meandered through the inevitable phases of the expository part. His periods rose and sank in a studied objectivity. He had much to tell — for he must fill up his largely allotted space — of the spiritual need and the spiritual nourishment, as contrasted with the earthly greed and folly of the children who ask. Of the

children who, in their ignorance and evil, clamour for serpents and stones.

It was very hot, above all, it was very close, in the tall-windowed building. The garments of the hearers were damp; their bodies sat cramped throughout the long morning. A grey film rose, spreading from the floor to the vanishing arches. The watery sunlit streamed over it, meeting the preacher's pale eyes.

"If ye, then, being evil—" His voice changed; a note of emotion came into it, sustained, increasing. He seized on the word "then"; he flung it pitilessly at his audience, again and again. He clung to it and would not let it go; it rang out in his boyish accents, a protest, a proof, an exculpation of his Master!

"If ye, then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, shall the Father in heaven *not* know? If ye, then, ask for bread of that Father, shall the gift that He gives prove a stone?" He stopped; he rested upon the great Bible; his form, in the strain of their eager listening, seemed to grow before their eyes with the growth of passion in his voice. It broke over them like a torrent of thunder—a memory of the morning's storm.

"Still bread!" cried the preacher, "though ye deem it a stone of His giving! Still bread, though it bruise your hands and though it break your teeth! Bread of life, for ye asked, and the Father has given it! Bread of life, in the end, whatsoever it seems to you now, in the eating! Still bread, not a stone! Do you dare to take this thing that the Father has sent you, this trouble, this bereavement, this unbearable affliction—do you dare, you poor mortal, to spread it out in God's presence — to say, 'Father, I asked Thee! I asked Thee! Thou hast given me a stone!'

"Do you dare?"

He paused. He was looking at his vast congregation; he was looking into them. He was looking everywhere but at that one spot, to the right, close beneath him, where his crushed father bent, with face uplifted, bent low upon a stick.

He was looking at Harmen Pols.

He leaned over the front of the pulpit and spoke into space. All the vehemence had gone out of his accents; they were wondrously tender.

"Son, thou art in error. It is bread!"

A sob broke from the sick man. The immense concourse thrilled to it. Those who ventured to glance towards him saw the tears raining down his powerful face.

The emotion that spreads suddenly, for good or evil, through a mighty multitude, shook like an electric current a thousand quivering hearts in that assembly. They were men and women schooled to love the mysteries of faith. Their yearning went out to the yearning of the preacher. They hoped with him; they prayed; they believed.

He lifted up his hands to the blue sky beyond the far windows.

"See, we are crying to Thee in the desert! Wilt Thou let us then starve where we fell by the way? We ask, Father, for bread! See, the sky darkens; the storm-clouds sink black between us and Thy presence! Father, we perish in the desert! The clouds break! Thou answerest in the hail-storm! Thine answer, great Father, are these stones?"

Once more he paused, a long moment of agony.

"Thou answerest; Thine answer is manna! Lord, we believe; help Thou our unbelief!"

When the deacon came round for the offertory, a few

minutes later, Harmen Pols drew the parcel from his pocket and dropped it into the big black bag.

He did not understand clearly what had happened to him or to any one else. He didn't know what it was all about, and he wished he hadn't come. Suerus had been right about not entering a church.

But he saw, as all saw, the sick man, the great preacher, weeping like a child. He saw that many, in that great gathering, were weeping also, and that the faces of the dullest were transfigured with something of celestial light. As for himself, nothing had exactly suited his own needs, or he might have rebelled at the unreasonable coincidence; yet the words of the preacher had pierced into his darkness, as sunlight breaks suddenly on the storm.

He sat beside the parrot-beaked cobbler. He heard the man say, in the far-away clouddland: "Some day — with practice — that boy may equal his father." He saw, as all saw, that the boy now lay with his hands on the great Bible. But all these things reached him in a mist.

"Are you going?" said the cobbler. "There's a lot more to come!"

"I'm going. I've had more than my share. I want to get out!"

CHAPTER XVII

“**H**A! Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha!” The second volley much intentionally louder than the preceding one—it was thus that Roel Slink greeted his nephew, as the latter emerged meditatively between the oak doors.

The great square was almost empty, with the solemn expectancy of a wide silence round a crowded church. Amongst the young idlers whom gossip had attracted to the entrance stood Roel Slink, in his smart Sunday best; bowler hat, scarlet tie. And laughing face, with the dimples, and sparkles, the lips that parted gaily about the shining teeth.

“Church?” said Roel. “Ha! Ha! Ha! What do *you* go to church for?”

“To pray for you,” answered Harmen Pols.

“Thanks,” jested Roel. “But I’m a sort of Catholic. I pray to Madonnas.” He added complacently, “They hear me.”

“Leave me alone,” said Harmen. “I don’t want to say rude things about your virgin.” He drew a full breath in the gloriously fresh sunshine. Far and wide the closed shops, the empty streets, spoke of Sabbath repose. In his quaint little corner-house, gabled and slanting, old Suerus sat ready to study the faces that still go to church. Over his head hung, brightened by the rain, the sign of “The Wandering Jew” which a local artist had put up for him. Ahasuerus had accepted it without comment—one evening on returning he had

seen it swinging from a distance — but he had painted under it the words "The Philosopher"; there it dangles — unchanged, eternal and erratic, as the search after truth — to this day.

"I didn't know you were so hot on religious entertainments," answered Roel, huffed. "It's a long way to come for just a local scandal."

"True," said Harmen. "I can have those at home." He was angry with himself for the unchecked spite of his replies. "I am going in there," he said.

"To old Suerus? What about? Do you want to sell him your mother's china?"

"I want to ask him about mending a piece that was broken at your wedding."

"My wedding!" echoed Roel, thoughtfully. "It seems a long while ago."

He stood opposite the Jew's window.

"More than one peace was broken at my wedding," he said, and he nodded to Socrates (who took no notice). "I'll wait outside."

Harmen turned to him desperately. "What do you want of me?" he asked.

"How well your coat fits," replied Roel, smoothing the breast. "Not a rimple. No ugly bulging parcels in your pocket. Now I —" he drew out a cigar-case, "have this."

"No, thanks," answered Pols.

"You are unfriendly," said Roel. "They're your father's. I took half a dozen from the table."

"Roel," said Harmen, "you might stop. Unless you mean to be nasty. I don't see why. You owe me no grudge."

"I'm not so sure of that," retorted Roel, blinking. "You advised me to marry your aunt."

"Give me one, as they're father's," said Harmen.

"Believing her not to have a cent. It was a wicked thing to do."

"You shall have the money," said Harmen.

"Be reasonable! Without the money I should surely have been a lunatic. Lock me up!"

"Not as a lunatic. I don't mind saying I wish I could get you locked up in the other place. You've beggared us. There, now owe me your grudge!"

Roel scowled, but he said smoothly, "Don't exaggerate. I saw Blass at Vulsevol's last night, before you saw him. Went there on purpose. We talked of you!"

"D—— you, what did you say about me?" cried Harmen.

"Don't swear, coming out of church. Leave damning sinners to the man inside. I said you had a look of him. So—curiously enough—you have."

"I suppose you still carry that little revolver?" said Harmen.

"Yes; I don't mind my pockets bulging out. Would you wring my neck else? It's all done—I mean, what I did—in kindness. On my behalf too, I admit, for I want the money. I said nice things about you, how good you were to your mother. He seemed to like it. And that I thought you were gone to ask him a favour. Oh, I didn't say what."

"Thank you."

"I said I didn't know what you'd gone for," corrected Roel. "There, it's no use crying over spilt milk. I've married her, I thought there'd be more money. I must have what I've earned—soon."

The Jew had opened his window. "Roel Slink!" he remarked, for he knew everybody by name within a six-mile radius of his dwelling. "You must be wanting things for your house. Get 'em nowhere better than through me."

"Thanks," replied Roel. "I don't want any more antiques."

"Not cheaper, mind you," continued Suerus, smiling approval. "I said better. Give the best value, whether buying or selling — ah!"

Roel thoughtfully pushed his cigar under Socrates' nose.

"Leave that!" commanded Suerus sternly, turning from Harmen. "That dog works six days in the week."

"Come along, Harmen! Come and see your aunt. Come and see how I work, even on Sundays. Better come. Aunt Josabet has remembered a lot about Govert Blass."

"If you bring me the pieces, I will mend them," said the Jew.

"I am going back — to Govert Blass," said Harmen.

"Have something to eat first," persuaded Roel, "and listen to the queer things they tell."

This last bit decided Harmen; disquieted, he followed Roel the few steps round the street-corner. As they went, the latter gentleman discoursed amiably of Israelites.

"What do you mean by 'soon'?" demanded Harmen on the doorstep.

"See how things turn out! When a man says he wants a thing — wants to *pay* for it — some other man always ups and offers it. Here's a first-rate pub I can get at a bargain, if I pay within a week."

"A week! That's impossible!"

"Didn't Blass —"

"I am going back to Blass presently to say we can't take his money." The maid opened the door flushed, her red hair a flutter. She dropped them a mock curtsey, and, with an arch look at Harmen, she placed one finger on her breast. "Parcel gone?" she whispered.

"Here's your cousin; he was at the Aegidius performance," called Slink.

Deborah, half-way up the stairs, came back. "I refused to have anything to do with it," she said. "I'm ashamed of you, Harmen! Now come in at once and tell me all about it." But Harmen declared he had forgotten even the text. They saw in his manner that this wasn't true. She ended by half-crying with vexation.

"When I was a girl," said Aunt Josabet, "we had to bring up the whole sermon again on reaching home. It was like taking a powder. I have never been able to touch powders or sermons since." She sat by her pretty lace curtains, with her pretty lace kerchief about her neck. Her canary shrilled ceaselessly to his mate between the curtains. The black velvet ribbons rose speckless above her silver hair. "Deborah won't read me the comic calendar on Sundays," she said to Harmen, with tears in her squeaky old voice. "You read it, Roel!"

"Let Harmen; he's been to church," suggested Roel. "That's his own father's theory of 'give and take.' "

"Which is heathenism," said Deborah, with an extra Sunday snap. "And he sins against knowledge, for many a time I've given him a piece of my mind."

"The only thing you do give," remarked Carlina ungraciously, for she sat with a half-filled glass before her. Carlina looked soured.

"And the only thing you don't take," retorted Deborah, moving the decanter.

"What's this you can tell me about Govert Blass?" interrupted Harmen. He wanted not to ask. He wanted to know. Above all, he wanted to be gone.

"Govert Blass," gurgled old Josabet. "I remember all about him. La, how long ago it is. And yet not so

long neither. Now, make yourself comfortable, Harmen. Deborah, give him a glass before his dinner."

Deborah smartly took the decanter from Roel. "Your grand-uncle's Madeira, Harmen, that was old when he was born."

Harmen knew all about the Madeira, which stood, with him, for Luxury, with a huge letter, a sort of symbol, like the feast of an Oil-king, Cleopatra's pearl. He smacked his lips over his thimble-full. (Deborah had bought the thimbles.)

"Go on, aunt!" he pleaded.

"Govert Blass lived at Overstad. He was quite a gay young man. Hard-working, but gay. At one time he got talked about a good deal in connection with my niece Jennie. People said he was going to propose to her, but he never did, for she wouldn't have been such a fool as to refuse him. He went to Transvaal, and she married your father. My poor husband said Jennie and Blass weren't suited to one another, though how any one can ever have the courage to say that, passes my comprehension. Who is suited to each other, pray?"

"Not the folks as marry," said Deborah, decidedly, turning the cupboard key.

"Hé!" old Josabet coughed. "They have to suit afterwards. But my husband—poor man—was always meddling. He died of it. So Govert Blass went to Transvaal."

"Is that all?" asked Harmen, checking his gasp of relief. "I know all that."

"She married your father soon after. Or just before. I forget. She went with her mistress to stay in the country, and she married your father a few weeks after she'd first met him."

"Disgusting!" said Deborah.

"On the contrary, child. Very sensible. Like that, they can always find an excuse in their preci—prei—I can't get it right." Josabet laughed prettily. "Hush! No, sing if you like!" she said to the canary.

"Marry in haste and repent at leisure," quoted Deborah. "That's the case with all men."

"Not with all, or you'd have had a chance," said Carlina, smarting under what she took to be allusions.

"Listen to 'em, Harmen; don't you want to get back to your mother?" said Roel.

"Nonsense; women love wrangling, especially old maids," laughed Josabet. "Your wife's an old maid, Roel Slink."

Roel bent to pick a stray button from the floor.

"How tidy you are! A man should leave tidying to a woman," exclaimed Deborah, tartly. "A man should—" she paused; the possibilities were too vast.

"What should a man?" prompted Roel, ready to tease.

"It's a conundrum," interposed Josabet, cheerfully. "I'm eighty-three, and I've given it up."

"You said you were eighty-seven last night," corrected Roel.

"Did I? Well, I grow younger. Young lovers make me young."

"I wish Carlina was that way," sighed Roel.

"It's easy enough to say," put in Deborah. "It's so easy to lie." Her poor mother raised two little hands in protest. "I'm so glad people lie," said Josabet. "Almost all the nice sayings are lies."

"Some *men* forget they're no longer *boys*," opined Carlina. She spread out her stiff gown; she sat all of a piece.

Her husband edged away. "You mean that I went to the church-door!" he smiled.

"I did. A married man has no business to go and look at the girls."

"Oh — look!" laughed Aunt Josabet.

"Yes, look," repeated Carlina. "Would you expect him, pray, to do anything more?"

"Don't catch me up, Carlina. I'm old enough to be your grandmother."

"Mother," corrected Roel.

"And I expect people to do whatever they like in my house. No, Deborah, I will not have you cover up the canary. It's natural he should sing, for he's in love with his mate."

Roel burst into blithe carolling. Harmen, in spite of himself, laughed as heartily as Aunt Josabet. Deborah, snatching up her *Young Girl's Sunday Paper*, became indignantly immersed in its contents.

Singing and posturing, Roel turned with outstretched arms to his fellow lovebird. As he did so, she gave a fell scream and pounced, with a pinch, on his shoulder! It was his turn to cry out. And he promptly smacked her, in his truculence, on her great purple cheek.

She took no immediate notice. She held up, for all to examine, a long, glinting hair.

"Red!" she cried, and her voice had gone grey with fury. "Red!" She looked from one to the other.

The pert maid had come in to lay dinner. The maid looked at the table-cloth. Carlina looked at the maid.

"Go and put on a clean cap at once, you dirty little child," said Deborah.

Miss Mia veered round. "My cap isn't clean?" she cried. "Mistress, she says that my cap isn't clean!"

"You look very pretty," answered Josabet, hugging herself. "Run off and get the cap I gave you, with the frills!"

Deborah pushed the girl out. "Now, what's this?"

she asked, as pleased as her mother, from a different point of view.

“A red hair!” shrilled the wife. “On his shoulder! I knew it. I saw it. Oh, the monster! Two days married”—she swallowed a sob—“and now this!” She shrieked out at him. “I’ll be even with you! I’ll not stay with you! I’ll divorce you! I’m going back with Harmen! I’m a Pols, I am! Nephew, take me home!”

“Somebody pat her on the back!” said Roel.

He enraged her beyond power of utterance. She gurgled and gasped, the long hair still aloft between finger and thumb.

“What nonsense!” said Josabet. “The wind—” and “What wickedness!” urged Deborah, to whom Roel’s presence in that Christian home was an abomination.

Harmen stood reading the Comic Calendar for the day.

“She—she went out a quarter of an hour after he did!” hissed Carlina. “I’ll be divorced. I’ll have all my money back. I—watched them here, in the house, till half-past nine!”

“What nonsense indeed!” exclaimed the lover, turning right and left, in a real fix, despite his assurance. “I—I—I swear—”

“Not in this house!” burst in Deborah.

“Look here, Harmen—you know I met you near the gate—I’ve been with you all the morning!”

“In church?” cried both Deborah and Josabet, gleefully.

“He hasn’t been to church; I was joking. He didn’t even know the text. We’ve been playing billiards all the morning, of course!”

The three ladies inspected Harmen’s back.

“Then whose hair is this?” clamoured Carlina.

"Harmen's! Or no, hang it! Yours. Can't you see it is yours?"

Carlina's long head was thatched with tight-drawn, much-faded straw. The red and gold thread of evidence glittered in the sun.

"Absurd!" exclaimed Deborah, as Carlina's face began to assume a gratified look.

The old maid advanced to the door. Josabet, who was not going to lose this bit in the side-scenes, immediately rang her hand-bell.

"It's — it's Mia's, I do believe!" vociferated Roel, wide-eyed, despairingly inventive. "The — the silly little — ugly little servant's. I beg your pardon, Harmen!"

Harmen turned round. "I've got nothing to do with it."

"Excuse me! You won't deny that the young lady is your particular — what shall we say? Quarry? — not mine."

"I don't believe it," objected Carlina, much mollified by the "ugly." "I'll be divorced. I'll go home. I'll have all my money back."

"My dearest, forgive me for remarking that half your money is, once for all, mine."

"What?" screamed Carlina. She dropped the hair, and went down on all fours to look for it.

"You made no settlements. I suppose your brother thought he'd let well alone!" Roel spoke to the prostrate figure.

"The villain!" sobbed Carlina. "Oh, we poor women! Oh, Juffrouw Josabet, poor sheep!"

Deborah flung open the door. The maid almost fell into the room.

"Cover up the canaries!" cried Josabet.

"You, you — you hussy!" roared Deborah, shaking

her victim by the arm. "After all that I've done for you! It's the gorging and the guzzling and overfeeding that ends in flirting with a married man! I'll get you into the Reformatory, as sure as my name's Deborah! In you go for two years, on bread and water! A wretched little minx of fifteen!"

Miss Mia had gazed, during this shower-bath, from one to the other. At the end she found courage to scream out, "Seventeen!"

"The Reformatory!" exulted Deborah. "The cells!"

Miss Mia began to weep.

"Fiddlesticks!" called Aunt Josabett from her chair. "They have flower-gardens, and pudding for dinner!"

"Here you, what's your name, Mia!" put in Roel. "You know perfectly well you haven't flirted with a married man — meaning me. And if an honest young fellow makes love to you, and you listen, there's no harm in that, is there, Aunt Josabett?"

"Certainly not," said old Josabett, with great authority.

Roel took the stage. "But is it *wise*, Harmen, to go driving with her half the morning, all over the place?"

"Driving!" screamed Deborah.

"Look here — what's your name — Mia — with whom had you a long — talk this morning, before you — went to church?"

She snatched at his cue. "With — him, of course," she said, and tossed her auburn head.

All eyes were now fixed on Harmen, who met them with a most unguilty, but too ferocious laugh.

"The sheep!" said Josabett, reminiscent. "It's not wise of you, Harmen, but it's harmless — I mean innocent — in her. Driving!"

"I saw the hair on his coat this morning," said Roel, "before we — we went for our walk — in the wind."

"I don't believe it! It isn't true!" grunted Carlina.

"She shall go to the Reformatory, if it isn't," declared Deborah. "She shall go for two years, mark you that!"

Miss Mia began to weep again, heart-brokenly. Carlina pointed a finger at her nephew, feeble with hunger and hope.

"It's true enough," said Harmen.

"Driven!" cried Deborah. "Driven!"

"I didn't observe the hair," said Harmen.

"Are your intentions honourable?" said Deborah.

"I hope not," said old Josabett.

"A servant-girl!" said Carlina.

"You married a farm-servant," burst out her nephew. "Oh, hang you all! Yes, I've talked with her, Aunt Carlina, and I've driven with her, Aunt Josabett, and I've — kissed her, Cousin Deborah!" — a simultaneous scream went up — "and I'll probably desert her, Roel Slink." He banged the door open, and he banged it behind him. Bang!

Miss Mia had escaped to the passage. The front door stood back. The hot sun shone outside. The maid giggled, with one finger on her breast. As he passed her, however, her expression changed.

"Thank you," she said from somewhere at the bottom of her wicked little heart.

"You poor thing; you'll come to grief," he answered quietly, and tried to pass out.

But she pursed up her lips, close beside him. "You make me hate you!" she said. "I wish I could kill you. Why don't you 'list? You'd look awfully nice in a uniform!"

The last words she spoke to his receding back.

CHAPTER XVIII

“**S**UERUS,” said Harmen, reining in the mare by the water-side, just beyond the old bulwarks; “if you’re as old as the town itself. Did you know Mynheer Blass before he went to Transvaal?”

Old Suerus, whose real age was scarce beyond forty, lifted his keen eyes from his immovable float. He sat by the canal, his thin legs drawn up under his very long black coat, his orange face and beard hidden under his very broad black wide-a-wake. “Blass didn’t live here,” he said cautiously.

“No, but you go everywhere. Caught anything?”

“I have not,” answered Suerus; his eyes dropped to his immovable float.

“Blass lived at Overstad,” said Harmen. “Woa, Freckles! Was he a good man?”

Old Suerus gave so loud, so ugly a laugh — so fictitious, that Socrates took *his* eyes off the float.

“What! callest thou me good? Isn’t that in your Bible?” asked Suerus, and he turned his kindest smile upon Harmen.

“Well, I mean relatively,” said Harmen, striving to flick a hideous horsefly off Freckles’ shining back.

“They stick,” said Suerus sympathetically. “Are you good?”

“No, but I’m clean,” said Harmen, reddening. “You know well enough what I mean, Suerus. If you won’t answer, don’t.”

“There are better men,” said Suerus, gravely.

Harmen jumped off the cart; he went and patted

the mare's neck; he laid his face against it. Freckles endeavoured to get her nose into his hand.

The straight road was quite deserted. Only the rain of sunlight through the overhanging trees.

"Suerus," said Harmen, his face still against the warm, dark, sympathetic sheen. "I haven't got a human creature to confide in. I'm all alone and wretched, and down on my knees in the road."

"Take refuge in philosophy," replied Suerus; then, as if ashamed of himself, he added hastily. "And confide, if you like, in a philosopher."

"We are ruined, to begin with — financially," said Harmen; he said "fine-and-shally." "To provide my aunt's share of our money we shall have to sell the farm."

"The mortgaged farm," said Suerus softly, to the immovable float.

"But that isn't the worst thing that can happen to a man," added Harmen.

"No," said the Jew. "Now, what would *you* call the worst?"

"Not to believe in the people he's believed in," answered Harmen.

"I know a worse," said the Jew.

"Tell me. I shall like to think it exists."

"Not to believe in the God he's believed in," said Suerus.

"You say that! You?"

"Hath not a Jew eyes? But you don't know who said that. Look at Socrates watching the float. Why does he watch it? He never saw anything happen. What does he expect?"

"I'm sure I don't know," said Harmen, returning with a great gasp to the chaise.

"He expects nothing, but he waits. And meanwhile he does what his master told him."

"I don't understand," said Harmen, dully. "Who's your master?"

"Myself," said the mild Jew, proudly. "I do what my conscience tells me. The world says it tells me to cheat."

Harmen settled himself in his seat. "I prefer Father's God," he said. "It's simpler."

"But it makes such mistakes," said Suerus, bitterly. "I used to believe that all I understood wrong in what our Testament had said wrong must be right. Oh, such a time!" He flung up his line with the uselessly wriggling worm, and flung it in again. "That's when philosophy helps us," he said. "Stick to religion as long as you can, Harmen Pols. When you can't any more, come to me! There, now I've said it. You can't burn me — those days are over."

"So you now know what's right," said Harmen, hesitatingly, not comprehending, trying to feel his way.

"Seldom. I oftener know what's wrong. Your God's wrong, the God of your fathers. And your road's wrong. The short way to Lievendaal is over yonder, not round by your place at all."

"By that mill?" asked Harmen, pointing his whip.

"By that mill. Then turn to the left. And bring me those fragments you spoke of. I like mending. Blass is a good fellow, be sure!"

The young man left the angler and the dog, both intent on the motionless float. He drove as fast as Freckles, glad to think she was escaping from flies, cared to go. He wanted to get back to this man, who had somehow injured his mother; to be rude to him, somehow, to fling back his benefaction in his face. Every evening, wet or fine, Govert Blass drove by Eben-Haëzar on his way to the post. Harmen Pols would no longer be there to see him pass. Nor Harmen's mother.

Near the old gateway of Lievendaal he caught up Greta, the man's niece. Pleasant and cool she looked, as she tripped through the sunshine, in her simple white frock and straw hat.

"Juffrouw, may I drive you?"

"Oh no, thanks. It isn't worth while."

He walked his horse. "You don't mind?"

"No, indeed. She's a beauty."

"Isn't she?" He forgot the flurry he was in. "She's only got one little blemish — such a pity!" he sighed. "But nobody's perfect."

"Yes, I saw that."

He eyed her with mingling admiration and doubt.

"I noticed it as she trotted," said Greta, shyly, "but it's very slight. You don't see it at all now she walks."

"Then you do care about horses," he cried, the admiration conquering the doubt.

"Why shouldn't I! Does anybody not?"

"Women don't. Mother don't."

"We all did in Transvaal; it's a different life." She dropped a book from under her arm, and picked it up again. "Stupid!" she said.

"Have you been to church? No, not at this hour."

"Sunday school. But I do it very badly. I can't make anybody better than myself."

That seemed to him unnecessary, but he didn't say so, not being cheaply town-bred, like Roel.

"I've got your book," he remarked. "I haven't got the calf. It's dead." He checked her gratitude and regrets. "Can I pass?" he said, in the gateway. "How about the oranges?"

She laughed like the man, he thought, whom he had heard tinkle a tune upon glass.

"Sannie's asleep after her dinner," she said. "Don't you sleep? I thought all farmers did?"

He didn't say that he hadn't had any dinner. He found conversation with young ladies very difficult. "Is your uncle asleep too?" he asked.

She looked at her watch. "No, he's just woke up. Uncle does everything to the minute. He says that makes life twice as long."

"And are you like that too?"

"Not I. Besides, I don't want life to be twice as long." All the laugh that had played in her voice, like sunlight on a waterfall, suddenly went out of it.

"I thought that girls who didn't work in farms and — and mills," he said, "enjoyed themselves all day long?"

"I work from morning to night," she answered. "Why shouldn't I? We've only got Sannie. I was making marmalade when you came. Don't you like work?"

"Yes, but not worry. I hate and loathe worry. You don't go in for worry?"

"No, I don't. Worry's idiotic. You do your best and, if it isn't good enough, you do better next time."

"But your conscience?"

"My conscience only looks ahead. I think a look-behind conscience the most useless thing in the world."

"Folks'd have to be very clever and very good," he stammered. "Like — like —" he didn't dare to say "you."

She laughed a good deal over that. For various reasons, had she known. She was pleased that he should be so much brighter than she had fancied last night; she was just a little disconcerted at the thought that he might possibly have reached to irony (a superfluous fancy), and she feared that her eagerness to lighten the cloud on a stranger's forehead might easily have led her too far.

She was quite content, for the moment, to pass on the young man to her uncle. A stolid farm-boy, lolling by, took the horse.

"Don't bother about the calf," said Blass, kindly. "My niece and I remain very much obliged."

As he said it, as he looked up, in the full sunlight, Harmen, standing on the threshold, suddenly saw for himself that Roel's incredible insinuation was not entirely fanciful. In the look of the face and frame a likeness was discernible between him and the corn-factor. No use to deny it, once the thing had been suggested. It was there.

"You *are* like your mother," said Blass. "I thought not yesterday, but you are."

"What?" cried Harmen.

Blass recovered himself. "I—I said you have a look of your mother. I see her constantly in passing your farm."

"Oh!" said Harmen. "Mynheer Blass, I'm back to-day for my father and myself. I didn't know there was a first mortgage. I had no idea. Of course that alters everything. I ought never to have come."

Govert Blass looked down at his hands — that was a trick of his. He bit his lips.

"Sit down," he said. But Harmen remained standing.

"Have a cigar?" said Blass. Harmen declined. The older man lighted one. It calmed his nerves. And "It helps you to think," he said.

"So you won't have the money you came yesterday to ask for?"

"I thought I came on business. I didn't come to beg."

Blass forced a smile. "Shall we make the conditions more onerous? Heavy interest?"

"How?" cried Harmen, who was vainly working his

fists as an outlet to his feelings. "All you said last night about a fixed percentage was a—"

"There's a great deal of truth in it!" interrupted Blass. "Circumstances alter cases. Your conditions will be mine."

"I have no conditions. We are going to sell the farm."

Blass sprang to his feet. "Sell Eben-Haëzar?"

The young man faced him. "Yes. Is it any business of yours?"

"Right!" said the merchant, taking the facer. "But, look here, this isn't a moment to sell. Wait, at least, till the American depression is over. You know about that?"

"No," said Harmen, most unwillingly.

"You don't? Well, then, it *is* my business. My neighbour's my business. A drowning man's my business. Don't scowl like that! I'm old enough to be your father. Let's be reasonable! For Heaven's sake, let's be reasonable! I always say life's a tangle, in which man ties knots."

Harmen did not move. From very decency he waited till the other, outwardly so calm, had calmed down.

"It isn't *my* saying," continued Blass. "I don't say clever things. And I don't read them. But it's stuck in my head from somewhere. I try to untie where I can."

He followed up his own cue. "I've no business to interfere. I'm just a plain business man." He nodded to the two portraits on his wall, as if they had something to do with it. "I hate a mess. When I see a mess, I want to help clear it up. You would, if you'd been in Transvaal."

"Not other people's messes," said Harmen, fiercely.

"Well, you will when you've seen as much as I have.

Let's be reasonable. Let's treat the subject fairly. There's trouble enough we can't alter. Who's your notary? The Vrederust man, of course. I do a lot of business with him. Let me talk to him. The first mortgagee won't want to sell."

"His opinion won't be asked," said Harmen.

"No, but, I mean, he'd probably prefer to advance this second sum. They often do. Go to the notary — Paperasse!"

"No one could advance the money," said Harmen. "Except," he added, "as a gift."

"You seem annoyed with me," replied Blass, who had now mastered his emotion. "Can you tell me why?"

"I cannot," said Harmen, with increasing bitterness. "For having been good to us. Is that a reply?"

"Not unless you permit me to be better. Let me speak to the notary! You won't? Well, if you insist upon ruining yourself, let me at least give you one bit of advice. Don't stay beggared in Holland. Go to South Africa. Let me give you introductions there. I should like to help you on. I can."

"Thank you," said Harmen, struggling to utter the words.

Blass could not see his face. The man stood, as he had done the night before, by the window, looking out, but now into the full blaze of the sun.

"On just such a June day at this, I, just such a young fellow as you, started from Overstad, bound for Transvaal."

On just such a June day as this! And his parents — Harmen's parents — had been married in June!

"So you see it's very natural I should feel for you," said Govert, turning.

"Oh, very natural!"

Govert held out his hand.

But the other put both his, the strong, clumsy peasant-hands, behind his back.

"I know that you were engaged to my mother," he said.

"I was. And she threw me over. She did right."

"And all the world knows —" He checked himself. Was he mad, with this red mist before his eyes?

"Well?" he heard Govert Blass questioning, with an effort at pride, and with manifest apprehension. "What does all the world know?"

"That she loves my — father," said Harmen. There was a pause.

"Have you anything more to say to me?" demanded Blass. The pride was still there; the apprehensiveness had given way to pleading.

"No," said Harmen. "Nor you to me, I thank God."

"Be sensible. Come back later. There are things we must discuss." The older man strove to hide under defiance the passion of his appeal.

"There is nothing left to discuss between you and me," replied the younger. "May the Almighty strike me dead, if I ever enter your house again!"

CHAPTER XIX

OUTSIDE, in the full glare of sunlight, stood the boy with the chaise.

Harmen passed his hand over his eyes.

"You might have moved her into the shade," he said angrily.

"I wasn't told to," replied the stolid boy.

Harmen pushed the boy aside and threw one arm round the mare's neck. He steadied himself against her; he was trembling in every limb and furious with himself at the contemptible sensation. But immediately his emotion communicated itself to the exquisite creature he was asking for sympathy.

"Quiet!" he said, standing away. "Boy, what's your name? Who lives yonder?"

"Farmer Slok," replied the boy, sullenly. "My name's Teunis."

"Well, Teunis, take the chaise there and say —"

"The farm belongs to Mynheer Blass," continued the boy.

"Oh! — the little place beyond, in the trees, whose is that?"

"That's Jan Ratel's," said the fat-faced boy.

"That'll do; he must be a sort of cousin of father's. Lead the horse there, and ask him to let her rest in his shed — for Harmen Pols. Say I shan't be long. Walk her, mind you, or I'll —"

"What?" asked with sudden interest the uninterested boy.

"Oh, don't bother!" Harmen again put his hand

to his beating temples. "Here's a twopenny bit. Gently, mind!"

At sight of the silver coin the unwilling boy's attitude altered.

"I can leave her there and come back?" he demanded anxiously.

"Yes, I'm following." But first he crept away into the brushwood. He must hide as a wounded animal hides.

He must clench his fists, and open them again, then they would be steady. He must close his eyes — to stop that throbbing behind them — and, when he opened them again, he would see clear. Then he could drive. There was nothing the matter with him; it was absurd, it was idiotic to feel — what's the word? — nervous about driving. He shook himself; he pressed his teeth till his jaws hurt. That did him a lot of good; he pressed them repeatedly, clearing his brain.

He sat down, amongst the curling oak-leaves, his chin squared on his great fists. It was true, then. It must be true. It had happened like that.

They hadn't much to be proud of, like the gentlefolks. Eben-Haëzar belonged to them. So did their name.

Your name? Yes, you're proud of that, just your own name. And everybody else knows all about it, and sniggers behind your back.

But what does that matter, so long as you've got your own home, your own heart, your own loves?

The fists opened, the smarting eyes dropped into them. He had cried out, not perhaps in the regulation manner with bent knees or articulate utterance — yet he had cried out, his whole soul had cried out in the church, out of the misery that had come, and the horror that was coming — he had cried out, vaguely, stupidly, un-

accustomed to cry, knowing little of the Father, he had cried with a proud and a piteous cry. He had done more, much more. He had given up all that he had to give, his home, his independence, his awakening future; he had beggared himself to appease the Deity who, implacable, demands the bread from our lips, and flings back to us — a stone! How cruelly was old Steven deceived in his good faith. The Father who says "Give, and it shall be given unto you!" too easily takes all.

He was not angry with Jennie. Only full of pity for her weakness, her sorrow, her crime. Only wretched with the utter desolation of a heart that loved in peace and must learn to love in pain. He had never realized, not even when he spoke those passionate words of trustful comfort, that he loved his mother, never realized what was meant by the feeling, just as we do not know when we feel well. In the daily routine at Eben-Haëzar there was no talk of loving or not loving any one or anything. You liked people or disliked them occasionally, but never inside your own home. Just as you expressed like or dislike of unaccustomed victuals, but not of your ordinary food. Even Aunt Carlina you accepted as an incontrovertible fact. As for "loving" you were always being exhorted to love God: you didn't know, and didn't much care, what it meant.

Stay! Now and then, long ago, in the summer-time, amongst the field-flowers, and the heat, on days like this, in his childhood, his mother had rolled him in the hay, in sudden frolic, had caught him to her breast, in sudden passion, had covered him with kisses, had asked him if he loved her, loved her, loved her? Father had seen it once and sternly bidden her desist. She had done it twice again after that, forgetting herself, years ago, once when he first went to school, and cried, once when he had been confirmed. And yesternight once more,

she had questioned him, as in the old days, had entreated him to love her, just simply, through good and evil, for love's sake.

And he had said that the evil she did would be good, because she did it. He smiled wanly, remembering that. He had felt right towards her, and towards his father, felt as an honest son should feel, with a warm, unsentimental heart.

And here, in his heart, was a quite new sensation, a pain that wasn't as all his pain had been hitherto, in the muscles of the body, an ache that no repose would dispel. It hurt. With tenderness, sore sympathy, awakened affection. Now first, when he knew he was angry, he knew that he loved.

It hurt. He stood up, blinded, confused. He cried out at the smiling sky above him. It hurt! It hurt!

As a wretched rabbit, caught in a spring, pulls its leg all through the endless night, beneath the placid stars, and squeaks. It hurt. The giant wrath, in the pigmy man, cried out, underneath the great vault of heaven.

He shook himself with that movement he liked, which seemed to right things when they'd got muddled. But the pain remained. He must go and drive Freckles home, tell old Steven he had thrown away the money, meet his mother, as if she were the same mother still.

"Is that you?" called a hushed voice he at once recognized. It was checked, frightened, kept under, but at once he recognized it; her voice, the girl's. It came from the corner of the coppice. He listened.

"Is that you? Why don't you answer? I want you." He stepped into the open.

"Teunis!" She had met him. "Oh, I made sure it was Teunis!"

"I sent him off with my horse, to Jan Ratel's; he

might have been back." Her manifest alarm disconcerted him.

"He has stopped to gossip. He is not a very nice boy."

"He seems a brute. Can I help you?"

"No—I mean, thank you. No, no." She barred the way. "Are you going home? This isn't the road."

"Let me help you," he said. "Any one can see you are in trouble."

"How?" she questioned quickly. "How can you see that? You weren't looking particularly happy yourself." She gazed at him. "I am in trouble. I think you're a good man; one can trust you. Come along!" She led the way, into the little copse, round the corner. Just beyond, between some stunted birches and a corn-field, where the sun and sky suddenly came down in a pearly blaze and glitter, lay the Boer-woman, flat on her back. Her arms and legs were flung out; her vast countenance shone red in the heat.

The girl glanced at him anxiously, waiting to catch his impression — ill? — only asleep?

"Drunk!" exclaimed Harmen. He said it with such hearty disgust, she took courage, though vexed.

"The — the heat has been too much for her," said Greta. "This has never happened before."

"Come with me. I will go for assistance. Or leave her here — what does it matter? She isn't ill."

"I know. But I must get her home at once, somehow. If my uncle were to find out —"

"He would send her about her business. So much the better. Oh no, I remember!"

"What do you remember?" she turned in haste.

He frowned, uncomfortably. "Blass said you liked to keep her; she talked of your old home —"

"True. I like to keep her,"—she turned away again. "I thought it was Teunis. I had told him to wait for me. I don't know what to do; I must get her back to the house at once."

"Let her lie," said Harmen.

"I can't." She wrung her hands. "We *must* be in the house by four. My uncle has his tea and then goes for his walk. He is so methodical. He comes this way, and he'll find her! Sannie!" She shook the woman's arm. Sannie snored.

"What use would Teunis be?" asked Harmen.

"He would have helped to carry her round the corner to the back. It's only a few steps. He has done so before."

"I can do what Teunis could do," said Harmen. The words soothed him, and the waiting work. He actually smiled. He hoisted the great mass up; the girl was no weakling, she helped him. The Boer-woman hung stertorous, inert. Greta said: "I hold her legs."

They struggled along the narrow path behind the bushes, towards the scullery door. They caught a glimpse of Blass in a big chair, before the house.

At the scullery door Harmen stopped. Half an hour ago he had called on the Almighty to slay him, if ever he entered that building again. A man of few oaths, he respected his bond. Also, as has been seen, he had enough in him of peasant superstition to accept the possibility that an omnipotent Tormentor might take him at his word.

"I must get her up to her room somehow," panted Greta.

"Here goes!" responded Harmen: it seemed to him that he lost his last title to self-respect. He dragged the limp bag of flesh roughly up the staircase. He also panted, as he stood beside the bed.

"I thought you said it had never happened before?"

"Never anything like as bad as this. She wasn't quite gone. I — like it better so"— the girl blushed — "she doesn't talk."

"Why on earth do you keep her about you?"

"Don't tell uncle!" she cried anxiously. "Of course you won't?"

"I shan't tell Blass,"— again he smiled that queer smile. "But as a *companion*?"

Had she blushed before? "I have no choice," she said. "I can't turn her into the streets. And I may do her good."

"But a creature that gets drunk!"

"She's promised. She's tried. And there isn't much merit in having pleasant companions. Oh, I'm not over-hopeful. But she wouldn't leave off in the streets. Yet she might — she might be cured, you know. There is a way. That old pedlar was telling me. It's some stuff they put in their food, that stops the craving, some sort of ferment. It does wonders."

"Then why don't you try it?"

"It doesn't keep. I should have to get it twice a week, in secret, from the town."

"I could bring it," said Harmen. Had she intended that, remembering the book? Who shall say, as long as women are women — and men are men.

"Oh no — that couldn't be! Never!" she cried. Of course.

"It can, and it shall," said Harmen, gazing at the bed. "To save the old brute."

"She isn't so old. Nor so brutal! Yes, uncle, in a minute. I'm not quite ready."

"You're late, then. Where's Sannie? I want my tea," called Blass.

"Still asleep. Very hot." She came back, laughing

shyly. "What can one do? Now *you* must get away."

"You are a brave girl," he answered.

"Nonsense; one has to take life as one finds it."

"And blunder on?"

"No. Go straight ahead."

"Why, you *can't*, in a maze. I'll tell you a thing I didn't know yesterday. The God in your Sunday-school teases people."

She drew away. "Teases? Oh, you mean — no, we're so stupid. And He's got such a lot else to do."

"No, He teases us." Harmen slipped down the stairs. At the back stood the grinning boy.

"Nice girl, eh?" said the boy. The tone and the grin were too much for Harmen.

"You hulking cad, do you want to be kicked?"

Teunis fled, jeering. Over his shoulder he called out offensive things, easy to invent.

There were young girls, then, who accepted life as it came to them, and fought on in daily self-sacrifice. Suddenly, like a smouldering ember, wrath, not pain, not pity, red wrath flared up high in his heart, against his mother, who had not kept straight.

CHAPTER XX

“**Y**ES, I’ve thrown the money away,” he said. “ All of it. As you told me. Thrown it away.”

“ Not as I told you,” said old Steven, his lip shaking. “ I don’t want to hear anything about it. I won’t have anything to do with it.”

Harmen looked at him.

The old man rose in his chair, straightening his back. “ I *did* tell you,” he said. “ I’m glad it’s done. Gone, is it? Gone into ‘the treasury.’ Thank God, it’s gone.” He got his pipe.

“ Ah!” he said. “ Never mind now about the safe.”

Harmen went and closed the room-door, almost in his mother’s face.

“ I want *you*,” he said, “ alone.”

Old Steven struck a light.

“ I’ve been to Blass. I’ve told him. And I’ve spoken to Roel. He wants his money at once. To-morrow you’d better go to the notary and bid him advertise the sale.” Harmen drew a deep breath. Old Steven drew smoke.

“ Exactly,” said old Steven. The word might sound provoking, but not to one who saw his face.

“ You speak calmly. Your life’s over. I shall have to hire myself out as a labourer.”

“ I should have liked to die in this house,” said old Steven, quietly. “ I was born in it.”

Harmen paced the room. “ I’ve my question left. I’ve a right to demand an answer. From you.”

"Harmen, what words!" the old man's pipe shook on his lip.

"This money you have thrown away!"

"Harmen! The Lord—"

"This *expiation*—is it for your sin or another's? I am not a child. I have read the word on the lock. You have betrayed your secret. This expiation—"

"Spare me!" cried the old man suddenly.

"Yesterday mother said I must trust you both," Harmen continued without pity. "So I did—see what it has cost! You said the fault was yours, the vow was yours!"

"It was!"

"The vow. But the fault?" The room fell silent.

"Mother said I mustn't ask questions!" the son cried desperately. "I didn't. All the same, I've got my answer. I've got my answer." He held out his empty hands. "That's my answer!"

"Hush, Harmen!" the old man quavered, quite broken. "That's right. Don't ask questions. I never did. Don't you! 'Tis your only chance of happiness."

"Of happiness?" echoed Harmen. "Rather any curse of certain misery, than such happiness as fearing all the time!"

"Ah, God!" screamed the old man, like a shot beast. Harmen hesitated, stared at him.

"I can't answer your question, for I don't know the reply."

"But"—Harmen shuddered—"you don't know what I'm going to ask!"

"Yes, I do—yes, I do"—Steven's voice rose hoarse. "I bid you be silent as I have been! Silent for twenty-four years! I entreat you, I command you—do you hear!—as your father!"

"Ah!" said Harmen.

"Go up to your room and pray for comfort, and wisdom. Pray for a humble heart — that's best! You can't fight the Lord, Harmen!"

"No, indeed," said Harmen. "He flings stones."

"What — what do you mean?" Steven had put down his pipe: his thin fingers played around it.

"And we bring Him our Bread."

"Harmen!" — the old man half lifted himself in his chair — "I believe you speak blasphemy! In this house! You are no son of mine!"

"Ah!" cried Harmen.

Old Steven dropped on both knees. He took off his cap, from his wiry grey hairs.

"Lord, thou seest," he said, "that I have done my duty. Now, Lord, Thou wilt do Thy share! I have paid my vow: Thou wilt not leave me penniless. Thou wilt grant to me to die in this house!"

Harmen slunk away, ashamed, into the evening. The dog Poker ran out to him, in the dusk. "Good dog!" he said. "Good dog!" And he held the stick Poker had brought, for the creature to jump over.

His mother came behind him: he heard her footfall. He lifted the stick higher, called the more loudly to the barking dog. She, knowing he had carried off the money, made grateful allowance for the light-heartedness of youth.

"I found these," she said at last. He saw that she held in her hands the fragments of the broken plate.

"One of grandmother's," she said. "Broken! 'Tis a pity."

"Yes," he answered. "'Tis a pity when things break." He had not enough intellect to say the words with meaning, but he had heart enough to catch their meaning when said.

"How was it broken?" she continued. "Did you see, when you put it away?"

"Yes," he answered. "I broke it."

"Oh, Harmen, what a pity! All the more, now it'll — it'll have to be sold."

"Down, Poker! Down."

"If it — do you think, Harmen, it'll have to be sold?"

"Of course," he said viciously, looking at her standing there, with her plate.

"But why? If the farm brings in enough to pay off the mortgage, and Roel? I should like to keep grandmother's china. It's the one thing I've cared about. I am sorry it's broke."

"So am I," said Harmen. "Oh, I'm sorry it's broke."

"How queerly you say that! One would almost think you were glad!"

"Glad, mother! Glad? No, indeed. What makes you think I could be glad? I'm not such a blackguard as that. Though I'm not a good man neither. I swear a solemn oath one minute and I break it the next!"

"That is wicked," she said. For one moment — yet she knew it couldn't be so — she wondered, had he possibly, to drown his sorrow, entered some public-house? "Wicked, if true."

"Oh, it's true. Not like father: he keeps his vows."

"So would you, Harmen."

"Yes, mother: so should we all."

But she was silent. He repeated the words. He seemed to take pleasure in repeating them. "Give me the pieces: I'll get 'em mended," he said.

"No, that's impossible. Not — not to show!"

Harmen held out his hand.

"Old Suerus will get 'em fitted so no one can find the marks. It's wonderful how they mend things. Half the fine things are just mended, he says."

"I hate a thing broken and mended," said Jennie. She spoke with decision.

"Better mended than broken — when broken," said her son. He looked down at the fragments he had taken from her, without touching her, and he fitted them mechanically again and again.

"Let us go for our walk!" she said, nervously watching him.

His eyes flashed up. The pieces clashed together. She cried out.

"No, don't let's do that," he said. "Not to-night!"

"But I want to walk along the cool water."

"Not to-night!" he cried. "You don't want to go along there to-night!"

"I do," she said resolutely. "I don't want him to think we've taken offence. Or bear malice, or something. There's no reason. His offer was most generous, Harmen."

"Oh, most generous. True."

"He had no cause at all to be so kind to us. To you."

"No, indeed. Why should he be kind to me? He shan't. I'll see to that."

She burst into tears. "You are so strange," she sobbed. "I can't think what's happened."

He put his arm round her neck. "Nothing — nothing has happened, little mother. Only, don't let us walk along the canal!"

She leant her head against him. "As you like, boy. I should have preferred — never mind, it is as I said. He won't understand. He will think it is on purpose. We have always walked along the canal."

"Yes, and he has always driven to the post." Harmen loosened his hold. "But we have missed each other before. Or stopped away."

"In the winter-time," she said reflectively; she spoke

to herself, not to her son. "Hush! Those are his wheels!" She shook like an aspen. But she mastered herself and stood out in the heavy, sun-swathed gloaming, away from the trees.

Harmen sank back against the lindens, but the next moment he sprang out into the half-light, close beside his mother. The background of farm and foliage darkened behind them. On the road, beyond the bridge, the light cart came jingling by; the single figure inside it gazed unalteringly ahead.

"He hasn't seen us!" muttered Harmen, with a sigh of relief.

The mother said nothing. Not for a long time. And then only, "Listen to the nightingales!"

"I wish I had never heard them," answered Harmen.

"Not I!" she exclaimed. "Not at that price! Not even though all they sang was lies."

"It is lies," said Harmen.

But she shook her head. "Love isn't lies," she said. "It's the most awful, terrible truth, as you'll find out some day. We can go and walk now."

"No," he answered violently. "That man'll be coming back."

"Why—what does it matter all of a sudden?" she asked with a weary droop of her delicate head. "Has he been rude to you? Surely not! He can't help this business of your aunt's."

"He hasn't been rude to me," said Harmen. "Perhaps I was rude to him. I dislike the man."

She called the dog to her; she played with her fingers in the animal's shaggy coat.

"You don't know him," she said coldly. "It is a foolish fancy. Or a misunderstanding. He is a good man, though I couldn't see my way to becoming his wife."

"Because you loved my father!" said Harmen. He could have bitten out his tongue, as the saying goes. Here was the one thing he had resolved not to say—the one irreparable thing—he had said it.

"No," she answered, beneath the shade of the lindens. "I did not love your father." The very nightingales seemed to pause to hear her. "I loved Govert Blass."

"Mother! Why do you say this to me?"

"Because you asked me. Your manner is so strange, it almost looks as if your love were slipping from me. I cannot bear that. I can bear all our other misfortunes. Not that. Believe me, I shouldn't have said it, had you let me keep it back. Why didn't you? I can't lie to you, Harmen. I can't!"

He was silent. He wondered, could she lie to his father?

"Your father doesn't ask," she said quickly, as if divining his thoughts. "He is wise. I told him honestly I didn't love him, when he proposed to me; he was so much older than I—I said I—oh, Harmen, why do you make me speak?"

"I don't, mother; I'd much rather not hear." He rose from his seat by her side. The moon shone down on her, faintly, through the lindens.

"Wait! Don't run away now! Yes, you do make me! I must tell you now!" Her words broke loose, nervously, jostling each other, and falling. "You see, he understood I was willing to marry him. I liked him. We have been happy. I have done my duty by him. Oh, Harmen, you mustn't misunderstand."

"No, I mustn't misunderstand," said Harmen in a heart-breaking tone. He tried to alter it; it ended in a sob.

"You can't, if you will only listen to me," she pleaded.

"Oh, Harmen, why do you look and speak like that? Govert Blass went to Africa. I urged him to go. I didn't want to marry him. I honestly wanted to marry your father. I wanted to, Harmen! I had a perfect right."

"Yes," said Harmen.

"Hadn't I a perfect right?"

"To marry *my father*? Certainly."

"I have done my best. He has been a good husband to me. I have not repented."

Harmen turned to her. "Why did you reject Govert Blass?"

She faltered. "There are things a woman can't speak," she almost whispered. "Not even to her son."

"Not even when that is the thing he needs to know; that only?"

"Not even then." She stretched out both hands to him. "Harmen, that isn't my secret, that's — that's his! Harmen, I'll tell you everything you ask me — everything — but that's his! Don't love me less — I can't bear it. I'm your mother. You're all I've got. I do respect your father; who wouldn't? Love me, Harmen! I'll do all you say — say all you want! Only love me! Love me as when you were a little boy. Harmen! I — I'm just a weak woman, but I love you. I've told you all I could; is there anything more?"

"No," he said, as if afraid to speak too slowly.

She sat cowering. And she said very humbly; "You mustn't reproach any of us. It was all of it very natural — and — I think — customary. We none of us did any intentional wrong."

He tried to look at her; there was a mist before his eyes. He would have spoken of expiation; he bit the words back, as they sprang to his lips.

"And this niece of his," she said. "What is she like? Is she lovely? Did you take a dislike to her too?"

"She is lonely, and unhappy, and beautiful," he said. "No, not unhappy. She is too brave. And too good."

Then it seemed to her that she understood why she had fancied he loved her less, was less kind to her. And the pang of surrender is less cruel than the pinch of suspense.

"As charming and as good as all that?" she said lightly.

"Quite charming, and quite good," he answered. "And quite natural." He went away from her, up to his little room. He crashed down his window on the song of the nightingales. And in the mechanical repetition of his nightly few words at his bedside, the words she had taught him as a child, he stumbled suddenly, consciously, with a hitch. He broke off.

"It was all of it very natural and, I think, customary," he said aloud to himself, in the dark, with blind amazement. "We none of us did any intentional wrong!"

CHAPTER XXI

NEXT morning the waiting work cried out on every side. The blessed work. Right and left, wherever the troubled eye turned, its trouble was soothed by the sight of some thing in immediate need of human help. The little farm lay smashed under the fierce blows of the brief tempest, like a child that has been beaten on the face. The hay was down; there were great fissures in the court-yard, under the barn door. There was a leak in the worn thatch of the stable, suddenly soddened and as suddenly cracked.

The three of them, far too short of hands, went to work as if each had more hands than two. They spoke little. The old man, who had done more than he could the night before, tottered every now and again as if some screw had come loose in his spine. The others noted it, not comprehending. They redoubled their own efforts. For, in a farm, however small — and this farm was little more than a peasant-holding — the living life around will not allow a moment's pause. You can shut up shop, or stop a loom. The cattle call.

They worked in silence, as far as was practicable. They worked wide apart. Only the mother, now and then, with that dumb appeal of hers, would draw near to the son. He fixed his gaze on the effort beneath his vigorous blows. But he tried to smooth the black folds from his forehead; once he even glanced up at her and smiled. Some good woman, or some woman that had suffered less, would have thrown her arms round his neck and begun to weep. She went back to her daily

pails. "I cannot understand," she said, "why Apple-Blossom's off her feed."

Old Steven looked in. "The grey 'un?" he said. "It's the thunderstorm."

"No; something's disagreed with her. Look at the milk."

"She'll be all right to-morrow," said Steven, hastening away.

To this view Jennie assented. Life would not be endurable, unless we expected things to come right to-morrow. Least of all on a farm, where they habitually go wrong. The view was not naturally old Steven's; it was a compromise between his pessimism and his religious faith. Or rather these two, pessimism and faith combined, formed the hereditary creed of his calmly heroic race. All bliss had been moved into the far future; all evil accordingly remained in the to-day. When he said, therefore, that anything was going to alter for the better on this earth, and as early as to-morrow, the utterance was a conscientious effort on his part. We none of us can be consistent, least of all in our religious beliefs. Experience too pertinaciously goes against us. In old Steven's long experience some occasional trifle had been known to take a more favourable turn than he had openly predicted or silently foreseen. His wife would quote the case at him, and say that this time the Almighty had allowed him to overdraw his account. Or that the fairies had had a hand in the matter.

"Luck to-day means lack to-morrow," said pious old Steven.

The single post of the day—in the afternoon—brought a letter from Carlina, to say how wretched she was. A letter addressed to all three, even on the outside, "for I know their secret ways," said Carlina, who wanted them all to hear everything about it. "I

wear my heart on my sleeve," said Carlina, forgetting how sly she had been, or believed she had been, about her love-making. She now wrote how wretched she was — eight sprawling pages — Roel was rude to her; Roel ill-treated her; Roel snubbed her; she didn't love Roel; he didn't love her; she wanted to come back to them. They put away the letter, as such people do, to read at their leisure. It was some sort of satisfaction to remember its general tenor during the stress of the laborious day.

Even had nothing unusual oppressed them, the house would have fallen quiet through the absence of Carlina. For twenty full years she had been the noise of it. Ever since she came back from brief service in Vrederust, because she wouldn't do what anybody told her, whatever it might happen to be. Since then she had filled the calm place with sound. She was one of those big people who are always dropping something, over-turning something, sneezing, calling to somebody — who snore when awake. Her attitude towards the world was protest. Whatever happened, she was the central figure, wronged. Her life-course may be described as collision, unbruised. Her daily work was good. Her diversion, when not decking her sparse charms, consisted in the perusal of highly coloured love-stories, much drama and more romance, which stories it was her greatest pleasure to recount, over their needle-work, to a sister-in-law who, living real sentiment, loathed every word of their make-believe. Old Steven had long fancied his sister far too exacting to find a hero-husband. It is more probable that she eagerly accepted the very first man who looked her way (twice). Harmen's intuition aimed straighter than the arguments of Steven. What the hourly presence of this woman must have meant in the emotional existence of Jennie may easily be surmised.

"Well, read us again what she says," commanded Steven, after the taciturn supper. "I didn't catch half."

"What does it matter!" said the Vrouw.

"Read! Ain't it addressed to us all?"

The Vrouw read, by the lamp, pretty fluently, with more education than the men. True, the letters were large, too many per word as a rule, when not, more rarely, too few.

"Unhappy!" interrupted Steven, tugging at his pipe. "She says she's unhappy — eh? Ah!"

Harmen lighted a cigar.

"'Rude to me,'" read Jennie, "'and I hate imperiteness. *I* never was imperlite.'" She drew breath. Harmen snorted.

"She don't know the difference," said Harmen, "coming from her." It was the first time he broke through his silence that evening. It was his first kind, half-timid glance, reminiscent of much jointly borne insult, at his mother.

"Things sound so different," she remarked gently, "when other people say 'em."

"Rude — pooh, what's rude? Words don't hurt," grumbled the old farmer, peevishly. "They'd never hurt *me*. She's tough. What does she say more?"

The Vrouw resumed the reading. "'And ill-treats me.'"

"Aha!" burst in Steven. "Ill-treats!"

"Like the brute he is."

"Like the brute, eh? What brute?" cried the old man, brandishing his pipe. "Brutes bite! Brutes kick! She don't say what her brute does; does she?"

"Steven!" expostulated the Vrouw.

"It'd do her a lot of good — eh? She wants beat-
ing. Look at all the wretchedness she's brought on us.
And now to sit down and write us as if it were all our

doing. I love to think of it! She needs all the beating she'll get."

"She don't mind it," said Harmen, suddenly.

"Hush!" cried both parents.

"I saw 'em. I don't know much about women. My belief is, some of 'em like being beat!"

"That can't be. Oh, Harmen, that can't be!" cried the Vrouw, indignant, roused for her sex.

"Read on!" cried old Steven.

"I tell him, I shall leave him, and come back to you!"

The old man struck his fist on the table. "So she may. I needn't go to the notary's. Coming back, is she? So she may. Ha, where'll be Roel's money then?"

"In his pocket," answered Harmen. "*She* won't come back: that letter's just drivel. But if she did, Roel said he'd as lief have the money without her!"

"Only, he couldn't get it," leered old Steven.

"The law'd fetch it for him. If she divorced him to-morrow, the law'd give him half."

"Half our money!" screamed old Steven. "What foolishness you talk."

"He said so, and I'm sure he meant it. Why, father, seeing he went for to marry her, he must know."

Old Steven sank back in his chair. "I don't know about the law, nor do you," he said. "Anything might be law. I know I've got to give my servant half my father's farm. That's monstrous, anyhow. That's the law. Man's law ain't God's law." He rose to fetch the Bible for the reading, his nightly task.

"She couldn't get divorced," said the Vrouw. "People hardly ever can."

"How do you know? You and Harmen seem to know a lot!"

"I know *that*," said the wife, setting down a saucer for her cat. "He won't desert her. And he won't half-murder her." She shuddered slightly. "Them's the only reasons. She'll be married to him now till she dies."

"And quite right too," said Steven, opening the sacred volume. "Divorce is of the devil. Though I don't understand about the money. And I hope he'll beat her more than she likes, Harmen. A wife should be subject to her husband. People marry that oughtn't, but nobody never oughtn't to divorce."

"Never!" echoed the wife, quickly. "Yes, I know you think that."

"Never, excepting for the Bible reason," said the old man, solemnly, laying down his right hand upon the sacred page. "And that's a reason that never oughtn't to occur." He adjusted his spectacles. "The second chapter," he began, "of the first of Thessalonians," he said "Thessalonians." He turned and twisted towards the light. "Of the first of Thessalonians. The — Lord have mercy! I can't see a letter. It's all a grey mist!" He took his spectacles: he rubbed them! he flung them from him. "Wife! Harmen! it's all a grey mist!"

"You're tired: it'll be better to-morrow," said Jennie, soothingly.

"Yes, yes: it'll be better," said Harmen.

"So it will," he answered, already ashamed of the outburst, recovering his natural fortitude. "Of course it will. I didn't mean that. It only startled me. I'm quite well. I've had my supper. Harmen, you read!"

"No, don't ask me!" said Harmen. The old man had already pushed across the Bible; both parents stared at the son.

"Why, you don't even know what it says!" cried the quicker-witted woman.

"I don't care what it says, I can't read it; you read!"
The sounds came fast; his throat swelled.

"The word of God!" said old Steven.

"Yes. I can't read it. I'm not a hypocrite. Whatever happens, whatever I am, only don't let me be that!" He had risen to his feet: he looked wildly from old Steven to the Bible, from the Bible to old Steven. At his mother he did not look, but he pushed the heavy volume towards her.

"Read it together, if you can!" he burst out. "Read it! I can't. Oh, it says wonderful things about what we ought to do and what we oughtn't. And we go on doing what we have to, just the same."

He left them together. He ran away from them. Unhallowed by the Scripture, he went to his bed.

"I don't understand what he means," said old Steven, sadly. "Do you?"

"Yes," she answered.

There was a pause. The cat scratched for more milk.

"Well he's your son," said old Steven.

"And yours."

There was a longer pause. Jennie stooped to the cat.

"Place your hand on the Bible, wife," said Steven.

She glanced up at him, and away. In the half-light in the shadow of the lamp.

The saucer slipped from her hand, with a splash; she tried to catch it: it broke over the floor, in fragments of china, in flops and drops of liquid, messes and stains. He drew back from the white splutter. She rose for a towel. When she turned he was gone.

CHAPTER XXII

NEXT morning came a reply from the Notary's clerk, to say that Paperasse was in Friesland and would remain away a couple of days. This brought the question of the sale to a standstill, for, although the clerk of course offered his services, the peasant-mind refused converse with any but the head man.

Moreover, Steven, his eyes in a mist, his brain clouded, still lived in hourly hope against hope that the mist would lighten, the clouds might clear. His wife, watching him stagger across the courtyard, followed to suggest, timidly, the doctor. He turned on her, pointing down into the ground.

"When I'm dead," he said, "you can send for him. 'Tisn't safe to have them before." He hurried on to do the work he couldn't do. "I'm all right," he said, sternly, to his son. But when the son brought in an odd man, he dared not complain.

If Harmen sneaked away twice or thrice to Vrederust and Lievendaal, he did so in the evening, and he rose to work in the long summer dawn, before three. Whatever satisfaction he obtained in these gloomy sunlit days, he honestly earned. Yet perhaps, if you are young and in love, or, perhaps still more, if you are old and have been in love, you will say that the satisfaction is altogether beyond earning.

If Harmen Pols was in love, he remained unconscious of the fact. He only realized the acute relief of escaping from the lurid darkness at home, the thunder-cloud atmosphere of ruin and reproach. Between his mother

and himself hung the tempest, like a curtain, waiting for the chance electric spark to flare it in twain. They avoided each other in the silence of apprehension; at meals they looked away. Yet the dreaded moments of inevitable contact loomed up through the twenty-four hours, like danger-lights in a mist. The morning greeting, the sad good night. Fortunately for them, these people rarely kiss.

The walk. That was worst. She gazed at him dumbly the first evening. She wondered what he wanted, what he fathomed, what he hoped. She loved him, beyond all her long joy and pride of loving, with a love now that was almost only a pain. At last she faltered:

“I am going out into the copse, among the nightingales. Will you come?”

“I want to see old Suerus about mending the plate,” he said. “Will you give me the pieces?” She went alone amongst the nightingales, weeping. She stood in the shadow of the poplars and watched Govert Blass go by.

The son felt there are things that no fate can require of a man. To stand there by her side, now, and hear those hated wheels!

Undoubtedly it was a pleasanter task to help some distressed fellow-creature, even when the distressed one was only a drunken old Boer-woman with an aggressive tongue and hand.

“The stuff is marvellous,” said old Suerus, contentedly. “It ought to be, at the price. But it is English. From the land of much money, and much drink.”

Harmen knew nothing about England, except that the English bought pigs. He had been told that all the English, rich and poor, ate pig for breakfast, and no statement could have conveyed to his mind a distincter

impression of unlimited, although undesirable, luxury.

"I suppose all that pig makes them thirsty," he said.

Old Suerus produced the little packet. "I must make this," he said. "It takes twenty-four hours to make. You will have to come again to-morrow."

"Oh!" said Harmen, without much regret.

Suerus glanced at him. "You are going to take it across to Lievendaal each time?"

"Yes," said Harmen, clumsily. "She can't trust that beast of a boy."

"True," said Suerus.

"Besides, she couldn't send him. Her uncle —"

"True," repeated Suerus. "My son, here is your little book of philosophy. Only a quarter. And a packet of ferment costs a guilder and a half!" He sighed. A heap of boots lay close beside him. He ranged them in a neat row. "In what foolish directions will they walk," he said, "as soon as they have human feet inside them!"

"Better walk a bit wrong than turn up your feet in the middle of the road, like Sannie," said Harmen.

The Jew gazed meditatively at Socrates. "I suppose that is true," he said, with some pleasure in his tone. "Harmen Pols, I make you a present of the little volume. Keep your quarter. Now show me that plate."

He took the pieces, examining them lovingly, with superfluous care. Socrates, from idle habit, also examined them, sniffing over his master's delicate hands.

"You have more of these?" questioned the pedlar.

"Oh yes, a whole cupboard full. Do you think it can be mended?"

"Everything can be mended, I tell you, except a dead body. Even those used to be set up again by our prophets and yours. But those days are over. *Tempi passati*, Harmen Pols. Nowadays death's death." He

coughed. "I should like to see your cupboard-full as soon as I can come your way. How many pieces would you say?"

"I don't know — two — three hundred. I hope you're not ill, Suerus?"

"I am well enough to get about and earn my bread. And butter," added the veracious Jew. "Ain't I doomed to live for ever? Like my uncle was. Three hundred is a great deal. All one service? Fat is very bad for Socrates. But he likes it. Fie, philosopher, follow your namesake." Suerus gently stroked the dog's broad back. "There's bread and butter behind you, Harmen Pols. Will you share my supper? Eh, Socrates, you like Nietzsche, eh?"

Socrates barked.

"Your taste is a bad one. Nietzsche wrote the most beautifully worded nonsense that ever sounded reasonable. Not a bit like bread and butter. That was *my* mistake. Like talking to you, Sock, when a stranger is by."

"I disturbed you at your meal," said Harmen.

"No, no. I am not hungry. You people's chief reason for calling me 'Everlasting' is probably that I am most of the time half-dead." He smiled.

"Creaking carts last longest," quoted Harmen, with the easy sympathy of one who has never creaked.

"Cracked pots do," said the Jew, gazing down at the plate. "Three hundred pieces, did you say? Are there many chipped?"

"Not many," said Harmen. "Some."

"There would be. Doesn't one of your neighbours need new slippers? The first time I come your way, I must have a look."

"There's five soup-tureens," said Harmen. "My mother's very proud of them."

"So she may be! You won't sell these — eh? Excuse me; it was you spoke of the sale."

"Why shouldn't I speak of it?" replied Harmen, gloomily. "The posters'll be up in a fortnight. We shall sell the farm and the live-stock. Not the furniture at first. That'll depend. Not my dog."

"Ah — you have a dog?"

"Yes, he's not much of a dog, not like this one. But I like him. Fortunately, he isn't worth his keep."

"Well, don't sell these" — he tapped the plate. "Is a friend permitted to ask what *you* intend to do?"

"I shall go as a farm labourer. Don't mention it. You see, I must support the old folks. My father's not well."

"You speak calmly," said Suerus, with approving nods of his long head. He drew his orange beard through his yellow fingers. "You are more of a philosopher than I thought."

"A philosopher? No, indeed," exclaimed Harmen. "I just have to go straight ahead."

"You do well," said Suerus, gravely, feeding the dog with a little more "Nietzsche."

"A week ago," continued Harmen, not so calmly, "if you had told me we should have to leave Eben-Haëzar, I should have thought — I don't know what I should have thought. Oh, not that it'd kill me, as people say. Things don't kill. But that I couldn't be happy anywhere else. And now, why, I've lost such things — such things, I can hardly remember about Eben-Haëzar at all!" He got up and began pacing the little den. "I've lost my faith in Providence!" he burst out. "And my faith in —" He drew up, red-hot with alarm. "Do you know what Eben-Haëzar stands for?"

"Of course, I know. It belongs to *my* half of your religion."

"Let it go! The Lord needn't help any longer. It means Stone of Offence."

"Do not speak so wildly," said the flushed yet tranquil Jew. "We can twist a lot, Harmen Pols, but the eternal verities stick where they were."

"D—— the eternal verities," said Harmen.

As this was manifest nonsense, the philosopher made no reply.

Harmen seemed to realize the fact for himself. "I have no one to speak to!" he cried hotly, throwing back his head. "I can't think why I come to you!"

"No; why? I can't think either," said the Jew, looking wistfully out of window. "People come to me to talk about old clothes."

"It was you began, at the fishing! I must call out to somebody. There, that's done. Now let's be sensible. I called out in the woods; that was no good."

Suerus smiled; the orange cheeks hid behind his hand. He said solemnly —

"I don't pity you. I pitied you on the road to Lievendaal, when you were just a clod-hopper like the rest."

"It was I pitied you then," said Harmen, annoyed, "with the Boer-woman after you."

"Every philosopher accepts a Xanthippe," replied old Suerus, coolly. "But there, you know nothing about that. When you read the little book I have given you —"

"There's Roel Slink!" cried Harmen. "He's coming in. I won't meet him."

Suerus slowly turned his head. "Go into my bedroom, then; there's no other escape."

"Can I get away there?" Harmen's hand was at the door.

"No, but he won't be a minute. I want —"

Two doors clanged. "Are you alone, Suerus?" asked Roel. "That's right. How about the pub?"

"It is still for sale," answered the impassive Suerus. "But the price has gone up."

"What!" cried Roel. "Has the old miscreant—"

"The old miscreant am I. I feel that I may spoil the Egyptians."

"What Egyptians?"

"Quite so. The price has gone up."

"Well, I don't think I shall take it anyhow," said Roel, with fine carelessness. "There are difficulties!"

"Quite so," agreed the Jew, eyeing him. "The price has gone up."

"Hang your price! I shouldn't care about a hundred more or less. D'ye think I'm a Jew?"

"No," said old Suerus.

"What's your idea about this money in the bag, Suerus?"

"That it's no business of mine, Roel Slink."

"That's what you all say, you cautious old rabbits!" cried the disappointed Roel. "Scurrying away into your respective holes! I'm not cautious. Never was. Nor afraid to burn my fingers in cold water. Nor in hot. Well, good-bye. I have my idea. If there was any one in the world I'd have told it to, it'd have been you."

"You can tell my dog," said the Jew, indifferently. "He is a wonderful keeper of secrets. I tell him—and him alone—all mine."

"My solution concerns another friend of yours," laughed Roel.

"I have no other friend," said the Jew. "Good-bye."

"A connection of mine—by marriage," teased the talkative visitor.

Old Suerus blinked his eyes. "Innuendo," he said,

"is the weapon of the misinformed. Do you understand that? Weapon. Misinformed."

"I'm not uninformed," replied Roel. "So much I understand. I've proof that my good nephew Harmen popped the parcel into the bag."

"Discuss it with him!" said the Jew, raising his voice.

"So I shall. Certainly not—as yet—with the police. They have taken up the matter."

"I saw that in the paper; but why come to me?"

"Because you know so much of his affairs. He went twice to you last Sunday. He's been here since. Look here, you old Israelite, what's the meaning of it all? What are you plotting with Harmen Pols?"

The sickly pedlar, so orange and yellow, paled. Like all his kind, he was timorous, afraid of that freakish bungler, the Law.

"Nothing!" he stuttered. "Nothing! How should I plot to throw away money! Am I mad? And to your Church?"

"That's what floors me. It doesn't seem to make sense. It's driving me out of my mind, you old scoundrel; I *must* have an explanation. Throw away all that money—it's ridiculous! If I can't get it from you or from him, I must get it from the police!"

"Why not get it from him direct?" squeaked the Jew.

"Lies?" said Roel, scornfully. "Well, you see, I can think of those for myself, but not one that makes sense."

"Try!" said Harmen, standing in the little door-way.

"Eavesdropping!" shouted Roel. The dog barked.

"Philosophers all!" said the Jew to the dog.

"You said you were going to discuss it with me," answered Harmen.

"I have proof in plenty," threatened Roel. "Do

you mean to deny"—he leant forward, both hands on the table—"that the parcel was in your pocket when you went into the church, and wasn't there when you came out? Have you read in the papers that the notes were wrapped up in a sheet of *The Weekly Temple Lamp*? I know that *Weekly Temple Lamp*—didn't I nearly break my head that time I fell asleep over it?"

"Did I deny?" answered Harmen.

"What made you do it? that's what I must know," persisted Roel. "You're not mad! There's but one possible answer. You did it to spite me about that inheritance. Rather throw the money away than that I should have it! Didn't you say as much? It's the only solution. It's like old Steven! It is madness. The madness of spite! There wasn't any ready money —eh?"

"Hush!" said the Jew.

"Hush? I'll scream it out on the house-tops, if he doesn't reply!" Roel's ruddy face had grown livid; he hung over the table. "That woman as a wife!" he cried. "And her money in the church-bag!"

"Nonsense!" said the Jew suddenly, in great agitation. "Tell him to stop shouting, Pols! Tell him, of course, that the whole thing's absurd!"

"Yes, tell me, by G——!" cried Roel, "that the whole thing's absurd!"

"I need tell you nothing. Why should I?" answered Harmen.

"But that's a confession! It's a confession of what I knew!"

"It's not a confession, but it's not a reply," said old Suerus.

"It's all the reply he'll get," said Harmen, keeping cool somehow, in the street.

"I'll get at the truth! I'll get you into jail!" foamed Roel Slink. "I'll ruin you."

Harmen turned. "You've done that already."

Old Suerus caught Roel by the sleeve. "The pub's gone up," he lisped. "More than ever I expected. It's double the price!"

But Roel broke away. In vain, for Harmen had taken his chaise from the waiting street-boy and rattled across the square.

Roel Slink stood stuttering imprecations in the face of the Old Church. "I'll have my money back from you!" he said, shaking his fist at the grey building. "The police 'll get it back, you old thief!"

CHAPTER XXIII

ALL the long road to Lievendaal lay resplendent with a golden radiance of sunset; part of it, the great shadow of spinney and coppice towards Kothen, was resonant with the long repeated echo to echo of the nightingales. Towards the lower stretches of unsheltered pasture-land the atmosphere grew silent. Only the hum of insects gently disturbed it, about the horse's ears.

He drew up in the twilight. "I ain't late?" he said anxiously.

"No, I'm early," said the figure by the tree. "I came out to see the sunset."

"I haven't brought it," he said; and he told her about the ferment.

"I am so sorry. You will have to come again tomorrow, then?"

"Yes. That's nothing. Only, I'm afraid you'll be found out."

"I am not afraid about that. What's the use of being afraid? We're not doing wrong. We must take our chance."

He stood stroking his horse's neck.

"I like to keep my secrets, if I can," she said laughing. "But if they must go, I let go."

"This is such a horrible secret," he said. "Are you sure you ought to keep it?"

"Quite sure. Of course I may be mistaken. But one can't help that, if one's sure."

"I hate secrets," he said. "I never had any in my life."

"I'm sorry mine's your first," she said, with just a faint touch of mockery.

"I didn't mean yours." The profound misery of his tone struck her, in its utter unexpectedness, like a chill. She was sympathetically silent. Only for a moment. "Isn't it a glorious evening?" he said; he moved back to the chaise.

"Glorious," she answered. "Well, thanks, and goodbye."

"Down by our part the whole place is just alive with nightingales." He jumped into the seat. She noticed how lightly he did that — the heavy lout.

"Nightingales!" she cried. "I've never heard one."

"What — never?"

"Never. There weren't any at Trikklestroom. And there aren't any here. Only little birds that chirp."

"They're different," he said.

"I didn't know you had them at Kothen. I've never been to the town at night." She spoke so pensively, so yearningly, the grumpiest old grumbler would have thought out some plan.

The warm-blooded, quiet-hearted young peasant bent over the low splash-board. Could he help it that he was as pleasant to look at as good health and long honesty can make them?

"Supposing I just drove you down the road a bit?" he suggested eagerly. He conquered a slight tremor. "Don't you think we could manage it? Only round the corner!"

"Why, there isn't any corner for ever so long!"

"Isn't there? Oh, it isn't really far. Freckles goes fast, when she hasn't been doing much. But I shouldn't like to get you into trouble."

"My uncle won't be back. I should love to hear a nightingale."

"Come along!" he cried. He had driven Mia: why shouldn't he drive her? Were people in this world only to do things they disliked?

She sprang up beside him. "It's so pleasant to do as you're told," she said. "I can always walk back by myself."

"Oh yes, of course!" he scoffed. Then, with a sudden anxiety, "Do you really walk along these roads alone?"

"Sometimes — to meet my uncle. Why, they're perfectly safe."

"All roads are, till something happens," said Harmen.

"Nothing does happen. One can see you've never been in places where things do happen."

"A woman was murdered near Vrederust and sewn up in a parcel," began Harmen, piqued. "The police never found out who did it. They never do."

She nodded. "So uncle says. And if they did, they don't punish them, he says. Only a few years' imprisonment. He always says that isn't fair."

"Why, so does my — father," exclaimed Harmen, amazed to discover such agreement. "The murders have doubled, he says, since we gave up God's law."

"Still, it's not like a wild country, not a bit," she said, shaking her head. "Murder's dreadful, but so is shooting murderers. It's awful to have to think: who's going to shoot first?"

"Was Transvaal like that?" he asked.

"Well, not all of it. But where we lived you had to carry a gun."

"You too?" he said, amazed.

"Part of the time. When the blacks were about.

Don't let's talk of it! How peaceful this is! But the last golden streak is gone."

"No, tell me!" he pleaded fascinated. "It's so far off: we don't know about it. You had to shoot?"

"Once, when uncle was away. I don't like to remember. I didn't hit anybody."

She saw his smile in the gloaming: with a little human heat.

"I did it to frighten them," she said. "Uncle taught me to shoot."

"I see," he said respectfully. "It must have been a lonely life."

"Not as lonely at this. There were far more people about the farm. And it was home. That is why we keep Sannie."

"Lievendaal isn't home?"

"Oh, home is where one is, if you come to think of it," she answered gravely. "Every other way of looking at it's stupid. I like that book you brought: it's first-rate. Poor little David! They beat him in England, as they beat in Transvaal. Nobody ever beats here."

"They throw oranges," he laughed.

"You've never tasted marmalade. I didn't dare to offer you any at supper, because of what Sannie had done."

"Can you make cheese?" he demanded abruptly.

"No. I never tried. All our milk goes to the butter company. The co-operative."

"Oh, that's your part. Ours is quite a small farm, but our cheeses are famous. The Burgomaster's wife buys them at Vrederust."

"Your mother makes them?"

He nodded. "When you were gone, I asked uncle about your parents. He said he often saw your mother; you weren't like her,— not really, he said."

Harmen couldn't answer. "No, I'm like my father," he thought.

"So perhaps you're like your father," she continued. "Do you think I'm like my uncle?"

"In no way," he said.

"Queer, your thinking that. Sannie always says I am. Why, he might be my father, she says."

"There, that's a nightingale! That gurgle! Wait a minute. You'll hear him again! Hush!"

He checked the mare to a walking pace. Greta sat up, breathless.

"There it is — listen! — right away yonder, by the birches."

"What are birches? It is so dark."

"Over yonder — those thin things, that hang so. You can just catch the glint."

"No, I can't see so far, or I should have known they were birches. Hark, there it is! Oh!"

The chaise crept on, in the soft blue air, in the warmth and the falling shadows. The brushwood thickened round them. The road curled in and out.

Neither spoke. The nightingales cried out to them to listen. Nay, the nightingales cared not a jot whether any man listened. The road was deserted. An hour ago, a carrier had passed that way, whistling, and heard nothing of the concert in the trees.

Freckles tossed her mane among the midgets. Harmen, his hand on his knees, endeavoured to put away from his memory the night of Aunt Carlina's wedding. Why must that insist on intruding at this moment? He could bear its tightening clasp no longer.

"They often sing like that," he said.

"But I've never heard them!" she answered. That silenced him. He realized that it would be difficult for him at that moment to say anything which would not

strike a wrong note. "Rub her up the wrong way," was how he put it. She sat there, in her white dress, motionless: occasionally she drew a long breath.

"What makes him sing like that, I wonder?" she said.

"I wonder," said he.

"We must go back," she said at last. Of course it was not really so very long. Only a few endless, unfathomable minutes, unforgettable. An emotion that remains, when we look back along our existence, like a light upon the river. Like a glow-worm on our little strip of sand.

They were half-way back, in silence, through the silent meadows, before she moved. Then she broke into a ripple of embarrassed laughter.

"You mustn't think me absurd," she said. "It's — just a little upsetting. I know it *is* absurd. Only — to be as old as I am, and then to hear such music for the first time!"

He found no reply. For he felt that he wanted to say something, and he couldn't make out what. Not till quite towards the end. The trees of Lievendaal were in front, a dark mass: Older.

"Set me down," she said.

"I was just as old," he began eagerly, "when I heard that beautiful music." She did not understand.

"I had never heard anything like so beautiful before — your singing."

"O — oh! What a compliment!"

"What do you mean? I had never heard any one sing. It was like —" he stopped.

"What?" she asked, with feminine perversity.

"If I told you, you would only laugh again. It was much more beautiful, I thought, than any nightingales."

He had run round to help her alight. "You shouldn't have done that," she said boldly, like the horse-lover she was. But he held her hand in his as she sprang down. "Your taste in music is worth nothing," she said, withdrawing the hand.

"All the same, I hope to hear you again some day," he answered. He drove off, leaving her under the beeches by the gateway. She softly hummed the song, as she watched him, "Oh, meet me in the lane!"

"I should have sung it," she said to herself, "but for the nightingales."

Harmen had reached Kothen Church before he met Govert Blass. He gave him the very faintest salute, driving faster.

CHAPTER XXIV

NEXT morning, amidst the mute failures of Steven and the mute appeals of Jennie, Harmen, seeking escape in hard work with the incompetent "hand," was stopped at the barn-door by another letter from Carlina.

"One can see now that you've got friends abroad!" said the grinning postman. Grinning and grumbling, for two weekly newspapers and a dozen letters in a twelvemonth was about his opinion of what he owed to Eben-Haëzar.

Harmen read: "Come and save me from this brute. Take me home. Come, if you're a man!"

P.S.— Bring Freckles, without a cart."

He put the letter thoughtfully away, as he took up his scythe. Its brevity impressed him most. Shallow torrents were the rule with Carlina.

In the evening he told his mother. For she stopped him; she stood in a doorway, compelling him to speak.

"Yes, I'm going to Vrederust again," he said; "I must."

"Tell me," she said. She said it so gently, with so little insistence, such soft pleading, that he broke down, in a sudden thaw of artificial ice.

"It's Aunt Carlina. She's sent for me. Don't mother! I — I'm doing my best."

"Carlina?" she repeated, in surprise — a little doubt.

"She isn't happy. She wants me to help her. She — wants to come home."

"No," said the Vrouw, and squared her pretty mouth. She didn't move from the door.

"People can't," she continued presently. "Women can't. Oh, life'd be nice and easy, if people could do that sort of thing!" She turned her eyes full on his. Never had he noticed how liquidly tender and loving they were. His look fell to his feet.

"We women stay married," she said.

They heard old Steven calling querulously. "That complaining's a new thing with — him!" said Harmen. She must have noticed his stumble. It was the first time in his life he spoke of father as "him." Everything seemed changing around them. She stood dizzy in her familiar surroundings. She could not tell why.

"Tell her," she quoted:

"'Women that marry
Alack, alack!
Like snails they must carry
A house on their back.'"

"She knows that," said Harmen, with checked impatience. "You've told her before."

"She must take the lesson home now and learn it. It's like what the old shepherd used to say —

"'Sweethearts kiss and sing,
Spouses hiss and sting.'"

The Vrouw got the words wrong; Harmen righted them for her.

"Yes, it's difficult to say," she assented. "So easy to do."

"What made him say them to you?" he demanded swiftly. "Father wasn't like that."

"No, indeed, he was always good to me. Always," she answered, a faint pink on her pallid cheek.

Harmen, too honest, demurred.

She saw that in his attitude. "One mustn't count his — excitements," she went on eagerly. "I never did. No, he was always good. 'Tis a manner of talking. And Carlina will learn. The good fairies will help her. She must trust the house-fairies to help!"

"The fairies!" cried Harmen, angrily. "They killed the other calf!"

"She must learn," pleaded the Vrouw, not comprehending. "She can't come back. She mayn't. Tell her that. She must stay with him now, for better or worse. Why, she loves him! The silly! It'll be quite easy. Tell her. She loves him. Go, Harmen. The silly! She doesn't know. When you love, there's nothing sweeter than a tiff!"

"That's what I said. She likes a lick!" answered Harmen, making — nay, repeating, a Dutch pun. He went to put an old saddle, rarely used, upon Freckles. "Well, good night," he said.

"Harmen!" she cried — she caught hold of his sleeve. "Tell me the worst! Tell me what you think! What you fear! Tell me why you look at me like that! Anything is better than —"

He waited half a second, then he carried on her thought. "Anything?" he said, bending towards her, his hand ready on the mare's neck. "Mother, if I ask you questions will you answer them? Or shall we — shan't we leave them unasked?"

She put her hands before her face. "What sort of questions?" she faltered.

"No, don't let me — don't let me ask questions! If I want to, say you're mother! Say you forbid me. Hit me on the mouth, as father did once, you remember? when you were so angry! Scream at me, mother! Bid me hold my tongue!"

She took her hands from her face: all its peach-bloom was going. She stared at him, like a frightened fawn.

He flung his great arm round her neck; he drew her violently towards him, against his breast, face to face; he kissed her, once, as she sobbed, in silence, quiescent; he broke away. "Woa! Steady!" he said to the mare, and vaulted into his seat. Then he drew back, leaving to her, as a son should, the last word, the word of dismissal, the word of separation, if she chose.

When he had ridden away, she ran after him, across the bridge; along the poplars. She stumbled: she fell, helpless, her full length upon the road.

CHAPTER XXV

IN the centre of Aunt Josabet's courtyard stood a curious antediluvian fly. Not the insect, which, as all scientists are aware, was the size of the modern giraffe, but a vehicle like the one Mrs. Noah ordered (as shown by a print of the period) to drive her to the Ark. Harmen recognized this relic at once, for it is the only cab which takes luggage in Vrederust, so that no two travellers can comfortably leave the town by the same train. The same *tram*: a steam-tram, connects the little town with Overstad Station. Should there be a rush of departing impedimenta, it is met by the impulsive fly-owner with a "first come, last served." If you are fourth on the list, and the tram leaves at eleven, your fly calls for you at nine. The station is round the corner. Wherever you may happen to live.

No trams leave Vrederust after seven of the night. The post-office closes at five. But the shops remain open till eleven.

Nobody, on this summer evening, would ask for the fly. Therefore it stood in Aunt Josabet's courtyard, Carlina, after much haggling, having got it cheap. Its inside, as seen through the window, was clumsily stuffed with heterogeneous parcels, small articles of furniture, flowers and vegetable produce. Its roof, encircled by the iron rail which formed its unique claim to distinction, and which in Dutch bears the proud name of "Imperial," its Imperial roof bore an enormous pile of yet more unpicturesquely conglomerated bundles, boxes and bags, the whole surmounted by a light green baby-car-

riage, that rode, securely corded, the topmost top of Carlina's triumphal car. For, evidently, Carlina had conquered. She was going to leave.

The perambulator Harmen knew to have been Aunt Josabets wedding present. An old one, put away by one of her daughters in the good lady's shed. Aunt Josabets had sent it immediately on hearing of the engagement. With a valuable gift of linen (for we know she was a kindly soul) inside.

"I never refuse anything," said Carlina, and put the perambulator with the rest.

"No, nor anybody," said Deborah, when told.

"Well, what do you want of me?" asked Harmen. The three ladies sat, in various attitudes of importance, round the back room. Carlina had her wedding-bonnet on, the great basket full of corn-ears and poppies. Her hard cheeks were inflamed. Her gaunt limbs spread wide apart.

"I return to the home of my fathers," said Carlina.

Old Josabets giggled. They all looked her way. She was quite grave.

"My fathers and yours, Harmen Pols," said Carlina.

"I saw the fly. It ain't got no horse," said Harmen.

"Freckles can take us. I shall sit on the box, beside you."

Harmen whistled. Not if he knew it. However, he wisely demanded, "Where's Roel?"

"That person has gone to Overstad for the day," replied Carlina.

"And half the night, as is his rule," added Deborah, whose sour visage showed how much she was enjoying herself.

"Look here, aunt," said Harmen, boldly. "You're married now; you can't come back!"

"That's what I say," put in Josabets.

She sat among her lace cushions and pink frills. She nodded to her canaries.

"You're in a cage," said old Josabet. "Lucky creature! In a cage for two."

Deborah flattened out her stiff gown with a crash. It was the noise her mother most disliked. For no one but Deborah had the heart to make uglier noises than they could help to old Josabet.

"We shall see — we shall see!" fluttered Carlina. She half rose from her chair. "Unlock my cage, Harmen!"

"Talk sense!" said Deborah, tartly. "This is a free Christian country. Which means that woman is the bondslave of man. You've got to be sly as a serpent, now you've been foolish as a dove. Harmen's a big strong brute, and he's bound to drive you home!"

"Not I," said Harmen, feeling very hot. "You're his wedded wife, Aunt Carlina. The law wouldn't let you!"

"The law!" cried Carlina. "Ask your father what he thinks of the law!"

"The law won't ask father. Mother said I was to tell you —

"'Women that marry
Alack! alack!'"

"Stop this fooling!" cried the agitated Carlina. "Your mother, indeed! She's the one to talk of duty! A woman without a penny — a servant — that married an angel of a husband — and sits in the lap of luxury, and runs after —"

"You can't sit and run at the same time," interrupted Josabet. "Hold your tongue, Carlina!"

Carlina collapsed, with considerable ruffling. "I'm a Pols," she murmured. "You're a Pols, Harmen.

You can't want to see me insulted. Outraged! Disgraced!"

"It's no use appealing to Harmen's feelings!" struck in Deborah. "Not to his sense of honour! I told you so at once. Oh, I warned you. How can you expect anything but sympathy *with* the dissolute from a youth so openly dissolute as he!"

"Oh, I say!" exclaimed Harmen.

Again Josabet giggled. They all looked at her. Again she was grave.

"I unwillingly sully my pure lips with such words," continued Deborah. "But, when I remember your scandalous violence to that innocent child who owes so much to my bounty. That child to whom my example has been—"

"A warning," said Josabet. She nodded to the canaries, who were visibly making love.

"Get the horse!" cried Carlina, impatiently.

"She isn't going to drag that cab in any case," answered Harmen. "I'll speak to Roel, aunt. I'll tell him to mind what he's about. If you think it's absolutely necessary, I'll thrash him."

"You!" screamed Carlina, with supreme contempt. "You! A brat that I've many a time—"

"Don't mind her, Harmen; you're a man!" interrupted Josabet. "Come across and kiss me! I like your new expression. There's a lot more come into your good-looking face of late!"

"Mother!" shuddered Deborah.

"No wonder Jennie's proud of you!" continued the reckless old lady. "I like only sons. I've had too many children. Govert Blass was an only son too. A fine man in his day!" She flung a defiant glance at Carlina.

"Pooh! Ha!" shrieked Carlina.

Harmen turned on her. "Do you know anything

against mother?" he said compellingly. "Do you dare to suggest anything. Speak out! Do you mean anything? Do you dare?"

"No," she stammered. "I didn't say anything. Your mother's all right. Harmen, how rude you are! Your mother's quite nice. Take me home to her."

"I am not rude," said Harmen. "Do you want Roel to keep your money?"

"I don't care. I never had any money. That won't make any difference to me."

"A clean heart at any price!" said Deborah.

As she spoke, a lean horse, in loose harness, put his nose through the wooden courtyard gate. They watched his leisurely, broken-kneed entrance, with a leisurely, broken-kneed old driver behind him.

"What's this?" cried Josabett.

"I told Lubbers to send round at eight," explained Deborah, coolly, "unless he heard from me. I thought Harmen'd be nasty. Carlina can drive herself."

"I can!" said Carlina, and rose.

"You can't," cried Harmen, in sudden real alarm. "Why, you can't drive a donkey!"

"So she's found," said Deborah.

With nervous haste Carlina was gathering her few still scattered belongings.

"Where's my—" She opened and shut the bag round her neck. Red as she was, she grew redder. "Where's my—dear! dear! Deborah, did you see my—" She fussed about, clasping and unclosing her bag half a dozen times. "Dear, it's not in my—"

"What is it?" asked Josabett, sweetly.

"Make haste! He's nearly ready!" called Deborah from the window.

"I—" Carlina groped under the table. "No!" she

said. "I can't understand. I — But I can't go without it! I *won't*."

"Let me help you!" said kind old Josabet, hurrying towards her. Deborah gave a scream and pounced on Josabet's vacated seat. She held aloft a square of cardboard. Carlina made a rush at it.

"I wasn't going to leave that — for others!" declared Carlina.

Josabet laughed till her sides shook.

"The old soldier-portrait!" said Harmen.

"Yes — for Mia, I suppose!" Carlina protested viciously.

"Mia could have had another; you've given yourself away," gurgled Josabet.

"That's what mother said," maintained Harmen. "She loves him. You see she does, Aunt Josabet."

"Love him? — Not I!" cried Carlina. "The false — cruel —"

"Ugly!" suggested Josabet.

"No!" sobbed Carlina, clutching the photograph. She began to weep.

"Well, mother says we can't take you back. Don't you come. We can't take you," said Harmen, impressively, walking towards the door.

"I don't love him — do I, Deborah?" wailed Carlina.

"Don't ask me; I think you're a fool," replied the spinster. "I'm signalling that man to take his horse back."

Harmen was already gone, wisely thinking that when women collide in the road, it is dangerous for a man even to look out of a top window.

To Lubbers' driver he said, in passing, "You're in luck. So's your horse — poor thing! She's not coming our way with that luggage-van to-night!"

Round the corner,— the fateful corner whose opaqueness had cost Deborah many a leer,— Miss Mia stood expectant, hardly a surprise! She instantly dropped a curtsey. That Roel Slink should again be with her seemed a less inevitable fact.

“I thought you were making a night of it at Overstad!” said Harmen.

“Don’t be rude to your uncle!” replied Roel with a threatening look. “Come along with me. I want to ask you a plain question.”

“I want to hear it,” said Miss Mia.

“Well, why shouldn’t you? Is that venerable aunt of yours going back with you to-night?”

“No, she isn’t,” said Harmen.

“May I ask, did you advise her to stay?” continued Roel, politely.

“I did — strange as it may seem,” replied Harmen.

“S’deth! I mean, it is a pity you should insist on doing me an unfriendly turn. Because, d—— it, I’m a bad man to make an enemy of.”

“You *are* a bad man,” said Harmen.

Miss Mia clapped her hands.

“She’s married you; she must stick to you,” said Harmen.

“And I’ll stick to you,” answered Roel. “No, Mia, leave us alone. Go home at once and help unpack that perambulator.”

“Is there anything inside?” asked Miss Mia.

“A big ginger-bread doll. I put it in for her to find. You may have it.” In a flash Mia was gone.

“Now you follow me to the police-station,” said Roel.

“What? I’ll see you d——d first.”

“No, you won’t. We don’t want to see any condemnations. Better come quietly. There’s always a policeman in the square.”

Harmen followed, only a few steps. He was doubly perturbed. Greta would be expecting him.

The Inspector, in the dingy little office, put a few superfluous questions. The police were much exercised about this extraordinary business, that had made such an unconscionable stir. The questions, wide of the mark, like the gambols of a cat around her prey, paralyzed Harmen's natural good sense, as it was intended they should. For that is the Law's idea of getting at the truth. A son of the people, Harmen never for one moment connected law with justice. The legal squint is required to do that.

"You say the money was yours—your own?" repeated the Police Inspector. Having a clue, he of course, followed it up as the correct one.

"Yes—I said so before," answered Harmen, at bay.

"His own!" exclaimed Roel, excitedly. "What! Eight thousand guilders! His! It's absurd."

"Your father'll have to come here to-morrow," declared the Inspector, making notes in officially ruled registers. "Tell him to be here by twelve."

"He can't. He's ill," said Harmen.

"Folks are, when we send for them," retorted the policeman. "But they come all the same. We want his thumb," added this babbler, bending a wise, bald head.

"You—you don't believe me?" stammered Harmen.

The Man of Law leant back, his two fore-fingers in his arm-holes. "We believe whom we wish to believe," he replied. "We should never get at the truth else." He nodded to a constable, who opened the door into the street. Harmen stumbled out. Roel Slink came after him.

"Take my advice," said Roel. "Settle with me. You've got some money left. There isn't any mortgage.

I enquired. I only want my share. The law'll make mincemeat of your father — is he your father? — whatever he's done."

Harmen swung round and struck his tormentor full on the cheek, with the back of his hand. He stood still.

"Have you got your revolver?" he said.

The other recovered his footing. The constable came running up.

"Leave us alone!" said Roel with an oath. His comely cheek flamed red. "No police and no revolvers!" said Roel between his teeth. "I've found the way to hurt you, and I'll use it, by G——!" He turned on his heel. Harmen waited a moment, eyeing the constable. Then he walked on.

He walked fast to make up for lost time. Greta would be waiting.

He turned, in his haste, down the long alley between the two old houses, with their garden-walls, in the High Street. He was too flustered to observe at once the figure in front of him. Old Aegidius — well, not "old," the father Aegidius, the invalid — stumbling along from side to side, with his slow swing, on his two sticks. There was nothing remarkable in that, for Aegidius, unable to walk, rocked about the little town all day, stuttering to people about their sins and their troubles, distributing leaflets, doing what good he could. "*Parading his cross,*" said Deborah.

Harmen fell back, creeping as a snail creeps, fretting as — let us hope — a snail, even when it meets a motor-car, never frets.

At the further end the good Dominé paused, painfully. "I am sorry," he said. And he handed the young peasant a tract. Harmen took it, lifting his cap. Out of sight, getting his horse, he crumpled the thing,

unread, into his pocket. "Are Millionaires happy?" What did he care?

The tract decided the point it had raised, as is the manner of tracts. Its reasoning was quite simple. 1. All millionaires are dishonourable. (It said "most" but meant "all.") 2. Therefore their consciences prick them. 3. So they are not happy. The writer did not see that his error lay in 2.

"Well, I'm glad for him, poor old chap!" reflected Harmen. Not without some slight scorn of the psychic teeth that could chew granite and say thanks! The police! The police! The unutterable disgrace and danger of contact with these prison hounds—because he had abandoned all he possessed to the Lord for His poor! This was his reward. He stood there now penniless, dishonoured, with the police at his heels.

"Fast! Fast! Beauty!" he said, bending over Freckles' neck. But the road was hard: he couldn't gallop her here. He sought a bye-lane.

As he neared Lievendaal, drawing rein, with Freckles pleasurabley fuming and fretting, he asked himself, what next? He must leave his little parcel by the copper-beech, as arranged, and ride on. She wouldn't be there. Yet, why had he worried about her waiting, if he was sure she wouldn't try to be there? Already the slow evening had deepened. Again it was a glorious sunset, white and amber, for want of a cloud on the horizon, a placid, far-stretching, love-laden dream-hour, the world lullaby of the gloaming in June.

In the silence of the great shadow-filled beeches a human voice was making music. She was singing.

She was waiting for him. Awaiting him with a song.

"Hush, Freckles!"

"Shame!" said Freckles. "It was your fault that I leaped!"

Her song was not the one she had sung on that first night about the meeting in the lane. That was hardly likely. Not that he would have recognized the tune, or known the words. But it was a love-song, because there really are no others, if you come to think of it. Or, if there be, they are so rare and so difficult to discover, that she may be excused for not knowing of them. It was a sad song, sweetly melancholy, about dead leaves and loves and lives, pleasant to sing, when the trees are green, and body and heart are whole.

“There lay me down!”

She must have heard the horse’s steps some time before she ceased.

“Ah!” she cried. “You are late!”

“Yes, I was kept.”

“Later, I mean, than last time,” she explained, embarrassed by her own blushes. “Of course you come when it suits you. It is very good of you to come at all.”

“I am sorry you waited.”

“Thank you; what a pretty thing to say! But I didn’t wait. I was only walking about here. It is cooler on the road.”

“Oh! Why don’t you drive with your uncle to hear the nightingales?”

“Uncle likes to go alone, to the post. He doesn’t like me to go away much. He likes to keep me here.”

“It is horribly dull,” cried Harmen with heat.

“He doesn’t think so,” she answered gently. “I’ve always told him I prefer it. So I do. I like quiet, and my chicks.”

“And the Boer-woman!”

“And the school-children, and my work.”

“And the story-books!”

“Well, you see what a lot I’ve got!”

"Oh, I see."

"I believe you think I'm a very dull creature!" She laughed, with a touch of resentment.

"I think you're a right-down nice one." He stumbled over his own energy. "I wish all girls were as good as you."

"You know a lot about girls, I suppose. There are plenty of nice girls at Kothen?"

"No," he said precipitately. "There are not. Not nice enough. Not so nice. Most women are selfish, aren't they?"

"Is your mother selfish?"

"No," he answered in sudden wretchedness.

"I suppose you think she's an angel?"

He was silent. Freckles tossed her head.

"Mine was, I feel sure. I never knew her. That's very hard on any one. Especially a girl. There's lots of things I should have been much better in, had I had my mother."

"Humph!" said Harmen. But, as if to refute him, the Boer-woman's shout was heard. "Greta!"

"Oh, good-night!" exclaimed the girl, and ran, singing, away. She appreciated his having come on horseback: he couldn't have carried her to hear the nightingales again!

On horseback Harmen could keep clear of the village. He was glad when, in the dusk, and the moonlight, he saw Eben-Haëzar lying before him. At least, he returned alone. It seemed to him, somehow, as if in all the turmoil of the last days, his affection for the old home had gone under. The home of the Polses!

There was a light in his parents' chamber, a most unusual sight. He knocked at the door. His mother's voice behind it said, "Well?"

"She hasn't come. Is father all right?"

"No, he feels bad. Pain in his head. Let him sleep, if he can."

"Can't I do anything?"

"No, Harmen."

The door remained closed!

He waited a moment. Then he went up to his garret without a good-night, and, since of late he had observed that the words he said by his bedside were a sort of prayer, without a prayer.

CHAPTER XXVI

“COME to me, Harmen! Come! Come!” She stood at the bottom of the stairs, in her night-dress, in the greyest grey of earliest dawn, crying and calling.

“Father is ill! Something has happened. He can’t see.”

With a leap Harmen reached the bedside. Old Steven sat up, his eyes wide open, blood-shot.

“Something’s broken in my head!” he gasped. “It burst like a thunder-clap. Behind my eyes. I am blind.”

“Father!” said Harmen. It was all he could say. He said it twice. The word came quite naturally. The word he had told himself he never could utter again.

Old Steven sank back. He joined his shaking hands.

“It’s come,” he said. “That’s best. I know now. It’s God’s will.”

“I’ll go for the doctor immediately!” cried Harmen, moving away.

Old Steven recalled him. “You’re sure you gave the money?”

“Yes, certainly. Though, indeed, we might have kept it! But that’s too late now.”

“No—no!” He pointed to the woman. “Your mother! Right. You don’t understand.”

“Perhaps not,” said Harmen. “Shall we pray? Or shall I go for the doctor?”

“Both,” gasped old Steven; and a glint passed over the sightless face.

But the woman by the window turned, with the raw morning haze streaming around her.

"Pray?" she said. "I cannot pray. It chokes me here." She put her hand to her white throat. "I've prayed till I can't pray any more. Till I'm hoarse with praying. Sick with praying. Harmen's right."

"I can pray," said the old man, but he did not close the staring eyes. "I've done my best. I can pray till the doctor comes. And after he's been."

When the doctor came, he said that the patient, who couldn't see at all and would never be able to see again, must be very careful not to use his eyes. He also ordered absolute repose. A darkened room. Bed.

"Harmen!" Steven called, the moment the man of medicine had driven off.

"Hush, father! You must rest."

"Harmen, come here! — have you milked?"

"Yes, father!"

"Come here, then! Close the door. Keep your mother out. Is the grey 'un worse?"

"No, she's better."

"Sit down here. I want to talk to you. It's a fine day, eh? — again?"

"Fine and hot. But the doctor said —"

"The Lord's good about the weather. Now, listen, Harmen! I must talk. Doctors just say 'Repose!' and off they go. There's a letter come last night, whilst you were out, from the Vrederust police, to say they expected me there this morning. Eh?"

Harmen hesitated. There was no escape from the old man's sightless stare. It remained fixed on him, unchanged all the time.

"So they told me," he said.

"You've been there too? What is it? Tell me at once! Tell me all!"

"Don't excite yourself, please! It's the money you gave to the Lord. They've found out that I did it. And Roel says we did it to defraud."

"Ah, he knows about fraud!" said old Steven. He smiled — a quiet smile, terrible to Harmen, with the light gone from the face. "Pooh! I'm not afraid of the human law. Never was. It's God's law I was afraid of. And He's hit me about as hard as He can hit." He lay still for a bit, collecting his tired thoughts. "There's my keys," he said, "under my pillow. Open the secretaire" — he mispronounced the word: never mind!

Harmen, quite unaccustomed, bungled with the keys.

"I don't care now. The safe's empty," sighed Steven.

"Find a book," he said, "in the lower drawer of the inside cupboard, to the left. Under the handkerchiefs. Have you got it? Read what it says. Inside."

"It's locked," said Harmen.

"So it is. The key's on the ring. The little brass one. I had that lock made on it! Twenty-three years ago."

Harmen, with troubled fingers, did as he was told. He gazed down on the first page, as it fell open, of the thick, old-fashioned cash-book. Old Steven in vain expected him to say something. Neither stirred.

On the page was written in a handwriting more like Harmen's to-day than like old Steven's —

"Steven and Jane Pols, Man and Wife,
In account with God Almighty,"

and the date of Harmen's birth.

Beyond that title-page there was nothing unusual. Columns and columns of credit entries, month after month, year after year, with careful items of sales and prices, and always at the close of each statement the

number and letter of the bank-notes that made up the sum. One huge paragraph, in '93, the legacy, with a full account of the securities and their conversion into currency. Pages and pages of assets, the amount slowly climbing, an unprofitable cash-account, "as per balance," in the safe. On the other side blank pages only. Except, quite towards the end of the thick volume, the one line with the Sunday date, paying to the Lord the full amount of the credit side, and closing the cash account, thus suddenly debited. Balance nil.

"Balance nil," read Harmen aloud. He had never seen the words before, but he could guess their meaning. Balance nil.

"You see, it's all there," said Steven. "My savings. And my aunt's legacy, left to me only. I can account for every stiver. Let them come."

"Of course," said Harmen.

"But, Harmen, I — I — you see, I have to tell you now, after all. Why, I've been struck blind in a night. I might have been struck dead! I always thought I should have a long illness, like my father. The Lord's been showing me what a fool I am."

"Well, you've paid," said Harmen, bitterly.

"That's it. But I was mistaken to keep my eyes shut like that. I wouldn't see, I wouldn't. Of late I — I've been thinking it must be wrong. And I've asked for a sign, these last days, now my sight was going, and I felt so confused, and giddy. The Lord's sent me a sign. I'm blind, Harmen. It's a blood-vessel, burst on the eyes, he says — eh? Never mind! It's the Lord's answer. I'm blind. Lord, Lord, I've been blind all my life. And wrong to be blind!"

"Father, tell me some other day!" said Harmen.

"No — now! Harmen, it's right you should know why you've lost all this money! Why I've beggared you.

It was stupid of me, wicked of me, not to tell you. You've a right."

"No — no, better not."

"So I thought. For your mother's sake, and yours. Your mother didn't really love me, Harmen. It is fair to her you should know that. Eh?"

Harmen was silent.

"You didn't know it, did you? Not really loved. But she's been a good wife to me, very good. You've seen that."

"Yes," said Harmen, so earnestly, the room seemed to thrill.

"When we married, she had been engaged to another man. That's not unusual. He was her own age. Handsome. He went away."

Steven drew himself up a little. The sightless eyes still stared unalteringly at Harmen, holding the open book. The words shaped themselves laboriously.

"You are not my son, Harmen. You are his."

Harmen dropped the book; angrily he picked it up again.

"I knew it," he said.

This avowal, intended as a palliative, came as a horrible shock to the old man.

"You knew it?" he cried. "You lie! Impossible! Does any one know in all the wide world but I?"

"No, no, I have imagined it," said Harmen, striving to soothe. "All this fuss, these last days, has made me think."

"I — I don't think *he* knows. I don't think *she* knows," cried Steven, still more excitedly. "It's *my* secret. Mine only. The curse of my life!"

Harmen stood there clumsily, in the broad morning light. The hopeless counsel to keep calm stuck in his throat.

"She was very young, Harmen. Very poor. She couldn't help it. She'd been engaged, in secret, to the other; you heard her say so. She never told me. Never told me she'd been engaged. I don't know why he threw her over. Too poor, I suppose. I proposed to her, in the orchard. And she took me, an old man, for her. That's why she hates the orchard so!"

"She threw him over!" exclaimed Harmen.

"He went to Transvaal. But after we were married, before he went, they—they met in the orchard. It all happened in June. Our wedding-day's next week. Yes, they met in the orchard. Once I saw them there; they didn't see me. I saw them—that's how I found out about him. They—they were just parting, and—I saw them—kiss. How often had they done that before?" After all those years the wild hate in his tone, like a flame that flares up, and is struck down!

In Harmen's living silence only a slight click that might have been anything, to those sightless eyes. A face as firm-set as if the eyes could see it. Yet the sound was a sob.

"Yes, saw them kiss. I have never asked, never wanted to know more. I would have given my eyes not to know. I had hoped, had hoped to die without knowing! She was my wife, once for all, before God and the whole world. She never spoke of him. And you were my son. I didn't want to lose you! And—and it's wicked to suspect people. I was born suspicious. I've accused people unjustly—often. As a boy, I ruined an innocent servant. I used to remind myself of that, almost every day. I always tried to think I wronged her. But I knew all the time."

The door burst open. It was only the dog, rushing in, running to the bed. Harmen called him angrily.

"Leave him," said Steven. "Shut the door better. Is the door shut?"

"Yes," said Harmen, holding the dog.

"That night I made my vow, Harmen. To scrape the money together, all the money I was keeping for Carlina, so as to have it ready — in case she married; but, if I hadn't a home, Harmen, and — hadn't a son, then I vowed to give it up to the Lord for *her* soul, for her guilty soul, Harmen. Oh, what's eight thousand guilders for a soul!"

"But, fa——" The word died on Harmen's lips.

"It's not the mere money — don't you see?" the old man pleaded earnestly. "It's the life of scraping and saving — it's — it's doing all you can! It's nigh on twenty-four years of expiation! Lord, Lord, isn't that enough?"

He hung over the side of the bed. He lifted his hand in his darkness.

"No, it isn't. He's wroth with me for not seeing, for hiding, refusing to see. It's *my* sin — *my* expiation! Why did I marry her, when she told me she didn't love me? *My* sin! I shut my eyes. I had no *right* to marry her. It was *passion*. And He strikes me with blindness because I wouldn't see. We've lived a lie, all our lives, in this house — that's the Lord's answer! I'm blind! And He takes the house from us. Go to the Notary, Harmen; He's coming back; tell him to sell, Eben-Haëzar! That's the end of it!" He dropped among his pillows. "Though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him."

"Roel says there isn't any mortgage?" put in Harmen.

"There is. I told you so. Paperasse holds it. It's in his name. But he wouldn't have it inscribed in the Public Register."

"Then it hasn't any value?"

"Yes, he says it has. He can inscribe it any day. I don't know. Oh, this marriage! When Carlina was ugly, I thought that was God's way of helping us. So did your grandfa — my father. It's all been a lie. And I've cheated Carlina. And tried to cheat the Lord. I'm not angry with you, Harmen. 'Twasn't right of me to be so angry, because you advised Roel. You — you didn't know."

"Don't," said Harmen, who felt what such confession must cost.

"No, you didn't. And you'll have to work hard now. That's very bitter, and I not even — But you've been a good son to me, Harmen. Perhaps, it's all the better I can't see your face, now we've spoken. Never again. Have you ever looked at your own face? As you grew up, I seemed to — oh, Harmen, if only she had denied it! And every evening she walked where he passed!"

Both men were silent.

"You must call me 'Father' still," said the old man, a few minutes later. "And don't speak to your mother; I forbid it. Now the worst has come, I couldn't bear it. Oh, Harmen, I shall never see the cows again!"

"The sick ones are quite well now," said Harmen.

"Right so. Bring me the dog."

CHAPTER XXVII

THAT afternoon Harmen bicycled into Vrederust and found the Notary. He had telegraphed from the village on leaving Steven's bedside.

"Blind and beggared?" said Vulsevol, stopping him near the post-office. "Dear, dear! You had better apply for help to Govert Blass."

"I want no man's help," answered Harmen, stretching out his right arm. "Why Blass?"

"He's a rich man, and a kind man. And they do say he was sweet on your mother. I never heard it before. There's some say he's sweet on her still."

"Who's 'some'? That arch-liar, Roel?"

"Well, he lived in your house. And he's your uncle. Ha, ha! I like to think of a man in love all that time. Old love's like old gin, I always say. Strong and mellow. Except when they're married — then it's more like old beer."

Harmen didn't answer. In the afternoon he avoided passing through Kothen. It seemed to him as if suddenly the whole world were talking of his mother's affairs.

The Notary's house stood in a dull street of the dull little town. It was a dull house, and much dull business was transacted there, very profitably to the Notary. The Notary possessed an increasing connection, for he cultivated a dull manner, which inspired confidence. At heart he was a good man; in brains he was a clever one. There was really nothing against him, except that he charged for his services, and nobody likes to pay

a Notary. Still less do you like to call on him to arrange about selling by public auction your mortgaged family home.

"Mynheer is engaged," said the grimy young clerk, with a door-mat across his forehead. "Please step in here."

The door of the white-walled waiting-room closed on Harmen. He had never been there before, never transacted any business. The bare space into which he thus found himself ushered was full of the afternoon sun and the summer heat. In the middle, booted and belted, stood Blass.

Harmen would have backed, his hand already on the knob.

"Stop!" said Blass. "I am here on purpose to meet you."

"As I told you, Mynheer, we have nothing to say to each other. Do you spy on me?"

"Perhaps you need it!" An entire change had come over Blass's manner. "In my own interest," he added quickly. "Not in yours."

"My father is ill," said Harmen, accentuating the words. "I am here on his business. You know so much of our affairs, you can guess that my errand isn't a pleasant one, and leave me in peace."

"Be reasonable. If I know about your affairs, whose doing is that?"

"Mine," said Harmen, reddening with vexation. "That was my big mistake."

"You have made a bigger. Listen, do you hear! You must listen. I have come to demand an explanation. As a guardian."

The young peasant had flung open the door, to escape ere he said too much. In the bare passage stood the red cub, the stable-boy, Teunis.

"Will you hear me or shall we have in this boy?" asked Blass, somewhat calmer.

Suddenly smitten with shame and dismay, Harmen flung-to the door and sank down on a cane chair. The other watched him with increasing anxiety.

"Yes, let us keep the lout out by all means," said Blass, with a nervous spasm in his throat. "But I see that he spoke the truth. I couldn't have believed it." He strode to the window — a habit of his, it seemed, when perplexed — and stood gazing out, booted and belted, into the dull little town garden, of brown walls and tall trees.

"I don't know what to do or say," he began. "You swear terrific oaths — but you break them within an hour!"

"Yes," said Harmen, vainly searching for some loop-hole of escape.

Blass turned like a flash. "You admit that? You avow everything, now you can't get away?"

Harmen clenched his fists under the cane chair. He said meekly: "I went back into your house."

"After having taken the trouble — the quite gratuitous trouble — to hoodwink me by your big oaths. I didn't dream what you were after. I shouldn't have gone and watched you creep downstairs!"

"Well, I went up them first," said Harmen. "Did the boy see me creep up?"

"Yes, and so did Sannie, the faithful Sannie. Do you laugh at that?"

"I didn't laugh," said Harmen.

"You scoundrel!" cried Govert. "Out in the veldt we should —"

"What?" said Harmen. He got up from his chair and came close to his furious antagonist. "Consider yourself out on the veldt," he said. "Say whatever you

want to say. Only don't hit me. For I won't stand that, and I can't — hit you back."

"I am passionate; I don't deny it," said Blass, throwing up his head. "I — I thought I'd got over that in Transvaal, with the Kaffirs. You — you've made it come back. Put yourself in my place. I don't want to wrong you. You come to me, asking for help; I take you into my house. You come back, refusing help, say you'll never come near me again, and then you arrange interviews with that inexperienced girl, and you make her the talk of a Boer-woman and a stable-boy. There now, I've said my say. I'll be fair with you. What's your reply?"

"Have you asked your niece as well as the Boer-woman?" pleaded Harmen.

"No, indeed. I speak to you first. We shan't be disturbed. I told the Notary I would ring. Oh, I am often here. I came in about your sale. Why should I hide it? I'll come out now, anyhow; the first mortgage is mine."

"Yours?"

"I couldn't have spoken to your father. I can't speak to Greta. Not till I've spoken to you! What does it all mean?" — he shook himself — "The Boer-woman talks. And the boy!" There was a note of real suffering in his angry voice. "She sent him to me — Sannie did — the brute of a boy."

Not a word could Harmen utter without compromising Greta. So he said — and that was bad enough — "Ask your niece, not me!"

Blass folded his arms. "The Boer-woman is faithful in her way," he said. "She does right to watch over a motherless, unprotected girl. I want to be reasonable. Am I to leave her, as I daily must, while you come, at all hours, sneaking round?"

"I shan't trouble her again!" exclaimed Harmen, impulsively. The other smiled, a smile hard to endure.

"Another oath? Roel Slink was telling us yesterday, at Vulsevol's, how you come kissing girls — servant-girls — and driving them about in your chaise! A funny story; it made them all laugh very much. Not me; I don't laugh, *now*, at that sort of thing. And this morning Teunis came with *his* story!" He broke off abruptly; he turned to the window again.

"You won't believe me," said Harmen. "I admit that everything's against me. What do you want me to say or do?"

"Deny that you've been trying to get round this poor girl of mine! No, you can't. Why, you've been there again and again, on the sly. Greta paid Teunis not to tell, but the boy understood that I'd turn him off."

"The brute!" said Harmen.

"Granted. Still, guardians have to be grateful for the thief that catches a thief. By-the-by, before we part, she's not really my niece. She won't have a penny. She's just a poor waif, picked up along the road, so to say. She's secluded at Lievendaal, but men'll be coming. You're the first. I don't like your way of coming. Out yonder, as Sannie said, when a man comes in your way, we shoot."

He pressed his arms tighter; he stood there, booted and belted, drawing quick breaths.

"Yes, she's penniless. What money I have goes elsewhere."

"She isn't your niece? She hasn't got your money?" said Harmen.

"I'm her guardian, all the same. As you'll find out. I've told the Boer-woman what to do, if you come prowling round the place again."

"She shoots oranges!" cried Harmen. And he

laughed; he laughed till the bare waiting-room rang. He laughed. A boyish laugh, lightened, delighted, clear. He turned to Blass, who stood staring, with furious eyes.

"Have you told me all?" he said. "May I ring? She isn't your niece? She penniless? Why, then I may love her as much as I like!" And before the other could recover himself, the young fellow seized the old-fashioned bell-rope. He pulled at it so lustily, it came down in his hand. The grimy clerk appeared at once, Teunis behind him.

"Is the Notary ready for me? I am ready for him. Will you tell him, please?" And in a lower tone, which yet rippled like a brooklet; "I'm penniless too, Mynheer Blass. Why, she isn't your niece! I can love her. I don't think I'd quite thought about that. I hadn't quite understood. I can love her more than I'd ever thought I'd want to. I *do* want most awfully. She's not a bit like the girls here. And she sings! Why, I'd never have thought she could look at a Dutch lubber like me! But, judging by the fuss that beastly old Boer-woman's made, she — might!"

"The Notary's waiting for Mynheer Pols," said the bullet-headed clerk.

Mynheer Pols skipped out with a spring very unlike his usual slow peasant tread. "Why, I love her!" he said to himself. "I'm sure now; this is really it. I love her. She's quite different from anybody. And *I* feel quite different. And I'm going to love her a lot more!" The sun blazed against the dull windows. Nature lay panting. It was too hot for any bird outside Harmen's breast to sing.

"This is a very sad business, Mynheer Pols," said the spectacled Notary.

Harmen started. "So it is," he said lightly. "We shall have to leave the farm."

CHAPTER XXVIII

BEFORE Govert Blass had got quit of the town, driving fast (for he was a hater of towns), with the lolling boy behind him, he knocked up against Roel Slink, the all-day loafer, a man towards whom the energetic trade could feel little but cool contempt. Roel Slink, in the twisting alley, managed to stop the cart.

"I knew you'd come down here," said Roel. "I've changed my mind."

"Oh, indeed!" replied Blass, reining up, perforce, in the jingle and glitter of his smart turn-out.

"P'raps you don't like doing business in the street? 'Tisn't half a bad way. Walls haven't ears on the outside." Roel hung up against a lamp-post and smoked.

"I don't mind where I do business. I spent twenty years in a country where money rolled in-doors and out-doors from morning to night."

"I wish some of it'd roll my way," drawled Roel.

"A man had to snatch at it," retorted Blass, glancing down the other's sloped figure. "A man had to embrace his opportunity. I never saw a man there with his hands in his pockets. Not mentally, you understand?"

"No," said Roel. "I've embraced my opportunity. It's a bore — the embracing is."

"I'm in a hurry," said Blass, for Roel slanted across the narrow road. Teunis had gone to the horse's head.

"Well, all I wanted to say is: I won't take your offer of a mortgage on my pub. I'm going to buy it with Carlina's money. I won't leave that money in the farm. I'm master. I'll show her I am."

" You spoke differently yesterday."

" Yesterday it didn't seem worth my while; to-day it does. Of course, it's a bore handling your wife! She wants a lot of handling. Well, she shall have it." He looked down at his shapely hands, and yawned.

" She adores me," he said. " We shall rub on all right, if I keep my flirtations out of sight a bit. Rub and drub, eh? But I must get her away to Overstad at once, away from Deborah. You don't know Deborah. But you know Harmen Pols. You seem to take an interest in Harmen Pols!"

" That is my business. If you want to do business, take my advice, and leave other men's business alone."

" I'm going to smash Harmen Pols."

" That is your business. Stick to ours."

" Mynheer Blass," yawned Roel, " you must take me as you find me. It's deuced hot; I was never in a hurry. How impulsive you are! I suppose those are English ways. Well, good-bye, then. I want my wife's share. So they'll have to sell the farm."

" Tell me!" exclaimed Govert Blass, looking away. " This tale of yours at Vulsevol's last night, about young Pols, it made them all laugh very much — I suppose it was true?"

" What do you care?" answered Roel, boldly. " If you care, why not ask the girl?" He was eager by this time to do Harmen a bad turn, half a dozen bad turns. " Have you heard the talk about the bundle of bank-notes in the offertory bag?"

" I hear little gossip," said Blass.

" Why, it's all over the place! Eight thousand guilders in notes, dropped into the bag at the Old Church!"

" Stolen!" said Blass.

"So everybody thinks. But I've got another idea." Roel looked knowing.

"Well, I can't stop to hear it," said Blass, motioning to the boy.

"Yes, you can. It's only that Harmen Pols dropped the money in. I have proof."

"You have proof?"

"Plenty. They threw the money away rather than let me have it. That's just like old Pols. But I've warned the police!"

"The police!" exclaimed Blass. "You've made every reasonable solution impossible!"

"Reasonable or unreasonable, I'll pay him out," said Roel. He gazed down at his black boots, but he saw a red mark.

"Give her her head, boy!" said Blass. He was much troubled. The road seemed long. He greatly dreaded the interview with the foster-child who had deceived him. Harmen he thought he understood, but not Greta. He judged men by the standard of his own temperament, women by his chequered experience of deep black and pure white.

He found his niece in the kitchen, shelling peas. The Boer-woman sat skinning something. Blass heard Greta, as he approached, singing or humming aloud. He recognized the tune. "Oh, meet me in the lane!" He was not aware of the connection the song now had in her mind, yet, to his present mood, and his own memories, it sounded like an assignation.

When he opened the door, the pair glanced up at him, the clean girl, in her clean print, amongst the pretty green pods; the fat woman, loosely limbed, loosely gowned, smeared with blood. Suddenly the contrast smote him, the forlorn position of this sweet maiden at his bachelor hearth.

"Sannie, I want to speak to Miss Greta." They both looked at him in astonishment. He had never said "Miss Greta" before. As the Boer-woman stumbled away, over her own feet, "A good creature. A very good creature," he added.

"Yes," replied Greta, demurely.

"Or rather, to be fair, an honest creature, a decent creature," he corrected himself, "but hardly a sufficient companion for you, Greta."

"That can't be helped," answered Greta, bursting a pod.

"But it can," he said quickly. "I have been thinking about that for some time"—which was hardly correct, unless we include in a plant's growth its long sleep under the soil. "I have been selfish, Greta. You should go and spend a year in some cheerful place, with a nice lady, a refined home." He played nervously with the broken pods.

"And leave you alone with Sannie?"

"Yes—for the time."

"I don't think it would work," smiled Greta. She added, without any immediate after-thought: "I don't want to leave you."

"That's not the way to put it."

"Well, why do you want to send me off?"

"Do you think *that's* the way?"

Her fingers shook at the desolation in this cry.

"So of course I'm going to remain."

"No, for I am not so selfish. Greta, I have just let out that you are not really my niece."

She caught at the bowl on her knees, as it slipped.

"Why did you do that?"

"I had my reasons," he said shortly. "I said I was your guardian. That's only half true."

"You dear, why are you thus torturing yourself for

my sake? What has happened?" For although he spoke so smoothly, she knew him too well.

He crushed the pod between his fingers.

"Tell me honestly," he said, "are you anxious to stay here with the Boer-woman?"

"Yes," she answered carefully. "I am very anxious to stay here with the Boer-woman." In her reply he read only the desire to remain near Harmen Pols.

"It won't do," he said, shaking his head. "She isn't refined."

Greta laughed outright. "Well, no: she isn't. Ain't I refined enough? For the likes of us?"

"Don't say 'ain't,' Greta!"—(she said "ik heef").

She laughed again, with a little blush. "I forgot."

He paced the cool kitchen. "I'm a man," he said. "Just a common man. A young girl wants a good woman near her — to tell her things."

She bent over her bowl. "Very true," she said gently, "if she can. If she can't, then she can't." They both waited, in an awkward silence, a silence too full for words. Yet at last she broke it, stammering —

"I — I shan't ask Sannie to show me the way: I shall try to find it."

"Try! — it's no question of trying!" he burst out.

"'Tis a matter of sink or swim! Life or death!"

She coloured crimson, all down her uncovered neck.

"They say that a girl keeps clean," he continued hotly. "But she doesn't. Before she knows it, she's down in the dirt. Her skirt's draggled, nothing'll clean it! Nothing! Unreasonable, perhaps, but so it is! You poor, blundering fools!"

He struck — a hideous clang! — against a tin pot on the dresser. The kitchen was filled with the slowly fading sound. The listless cat sat licking her white paws by the shiny range.

"But she knows a good man, when she sees one,"—Greta spoke timidly.

"That's what you think. That's what the devil's taught you to think! That's what ruins you! I knew a woman once — pure as the angels in heaven — who said that too. 'A good girl knows a good man from a bad one,' she said. But she didn't. He was a bad man. She's cursed the day she met him, ever since."

The hens were running about crazily in their yard. The head cock was chasing them, wantonly, for the mere pleasure of the thing. One of them fluttered, screaming.

Blass turned, came away from the window, close.

"I — now? Did you know I wasn't a good man? Answer that!"

She rose, struggling with her emotion. The whole basin of shelled peas fell rattling all over the floor.

"Don't, uncle!" she gasped.

"You see, you didn't! You see, it's quite new to you! You see, it's high time you went away to the Hague!"

"You wrong me," she said, with a sudden girlish dignity. "If you were my own father, you couldn't speak to me like that."

He stopped, ashamed and alarmed. "I only want to save you from yourself," he said. "How can I help it, when I see you going wrong?"

The Boer-woman burst in. "What's that noise?" she called; she slipped over one of the peas. "Lord!" — her language very nearly approached a loud swear — "I thought something had happened!" she said: both knew she had but seized on the pretext. "All the peas on the floor!" she cried. "Lord!"

"She is excessively common," reflected Blass, as she stood before him dishevelled, down at heel. "But she is faithful. And, besides, she's the one link between Greta and the past."

The girl, a-quiver under her foster-father's arraignment, glanced at one and the other in dismay and distress. From the Boer-woman's dull eyes she snatched swiftly, as a bird culls an insect — a certitude of connivance, denunciation, intrigue. She closed her shaking hand on the clue.

"What has Sannie been telling about me?" she said, with some heat. "Let her speak to my face!"

"No!" cried Blass, imperiously. "I told you to stop away!"

"She shall speak!" exclaimed Greta. "Let her speak, uncle! Let *her* say it! I'm not a child. Sannie speak!" There was just enough threat in the last two words to disconcert the Boer-woman.

"Didn't Teunis see a young man come down from your room?" she asked brutally. She snorted and stamped back on the scrunching peas. The cat licked continuously.

Greta faltered. Teunis, then, after accepting and earning her bribe to tell Sannie that he had carried her as usual, had immediately sold the secret of Harmen's presence in the house, as an independent fact, to the Boer-woman. The latter, ever apprehensive of detection and dismissal, should her young mistress quit Lieendaal, had carried the tale to Blass. The thing was done.

"A young man," added Blass, "who had purposely sworn to me half an hour earlier, that nothing would ever induce him to enter my house again."

"He had sworn that?" she exclaimed, troubled.

"Ah, you confess!" He knew it; he knew all, of course, before he uttered a word to Pols. He was certain of his facts, yet the truth from her lips was quite raw.

"Yes," she said, and she gazed at Sannie with quiet, not unkindly disdain. To have hesitated would have

been to court an explanation, to unmask the Boer-woman, to drive her out into the Dutch fields! "It is quite true," she said, and she turned her back upon the servant. "I asked this young man to come upstairs, and he came. I did more than that. I asked him to bring me books, of evenings, from the town, unbeknown to you, and he's brought them."

"That also Teunis told me," he answered. "You have a right to say these things, in this way, if you choose. But you have not a right to think you do not hurt me by saying them, for you do."

The tears welled around her eyelids. "Little Father," she said, for so she occasionally called him, "I wouldn't hurt you for the world. I must say these things to you, say a great deal more: I can't help myself. Sannie may listen, or not listen, as she likes."

"Pooh — shoot the fellow!" said the Boer-woman.

"Yes, little Father, you have got to believe me. I asked him all that, and I told you nothing about it. And I can't tell you why I asked him into the house."

She paused; she looked at his tormented face; she read some of the thoughts behind it. The kitchen was shadowed and quiet; the Boer-woman stood breathing heavily; the cat licked.

"And yet I am quite pure and good," she said, in her eager pity of him. Over those conclusive words her voice changed to liquid music. They seemed to fill the peaceful kitchen with a melody of wedding bells.

She laughed merrily. "Isn't that an absurd thing to say? But you know how I mean it. Sannie doesn't; never mind. Uncle, you will let me say to Sannie, won't you? what the old Boer said to you? She must keep a quiet tongue in her head, if she wants to keep a quiet roof over it."

"Whom should I tell?" demanded the Boer-woman,

determined to tell, so as to ruin Greta's matrimonial prospects. "Teunis'll tell," she said, resolving to make him do it.

"You ask much of me, Greta," said Blass.

"Yes, and when Sannie is gone, I shall ask more."

"Gone?" screeched Sannie.

"Gone from the kitchen. Gone to box the ears of Teunis, whom I see pricking the old cock off the pig-stye with a pitch-fork."

At this Sannie, whose one tender thought in life were the fowls, wavered, so to speak, towards the door. Greta's tight-pursed lips, as much, perhaps, as an angry "Clack-clack-clack" from the cock, decided her.

"We are alone," said Blass, darkly.

"I owe you everything, little Father. You shall never feel that I wasn't above board. And, therefore, I want to say—I must—I—No girl would say it, I fancy, if things hadn't gone so far. I feel differently towards this Mynheer Pols from what—otherwise."

"Differently? Why, you've never met men!"

"Not many—still, I've met several. Quite enough. I haven't met *him* so very much."

"No, indeed."

"You mustn't be angry with me—what can I do now but speak out? I shall like to meet him more." She strove to check her trepidation; she failed. At all cost to herself, she felt that, having muffled the past, she must lay bare the future. She tore open her breast.

"Only," she pleaded eagerly. "Only, I want you to believe that I didn't think like this, when I asked. Certainly, not to know. I think"—she laughed tremulously—"I think it was nightingales. Have you ever heard the nightingales? He's really a fine fellow, uncle. His heart's in the right place."

"He's fine enough to look at," said Blass, angrily.

"That's what you girls notice. Looks! The first time. You're lucky, if you get a chance of a second!"

"I don't want a second," said Greta. "I never before saw a man I should like to be married to."

Blass came so close to her she could feel his breath.

"Never's a long word," he said, "on the lips of a young girl like you. You don't know yet what you may see. It's my fault for having kept you so secluded. I couldn't help myself. I don't believe in boarding-schools. It isn't fair to a girl." He put both hands on her shoulders. "When you were quite small, when the parson christened you, I had to promise to look after you. 'As much as I can,' I said. He wanted me to leave off that last bit; it wasn't in his service. Those big moths they have out there — the grey ones — were fluttering round his lamps and falling dead on them. 'As much as I can,' I said. A woman's a woman! I couldn't promise more." He turned away to the window. "Let the boy go, Sannie! Don't hit him like that!"

The Boer-woman and the bumpkin were scuffling and screaming amidst the cackling and scuffling of the fowls.

"The man's not a good man," said Blass. "I don't want to keep you for my sake. I try not to. You must go to the Hague. He's not a good man. But, there, only a fool reasons with a woman, when she's made up her mind to fall in love with a rogue!"

"I'm sure you're not a fool, uncle. Are you sure he's a rogue?"

"I am. Will you take my word for that as I've taken yours?"

"Oh, cruel!" she said, and she pressed her finger-tops together, till the nails whitened. "Oh, cruel! Why, mine was only a mistake, a misunderstanding! Whilst this looks as if it were going to be the biggest bit out of my life!"

"Not a fool?" exclaimed Blass. "Such a fool as never was! Here I stand arguing the thing down into your mind, as if every twist of my common-sense were a turn of the screw-driver! Oh, take him by all means! That's the right term—'all means.' Fair or foul! Take a man that runs after servant-girls, and owns up to it! To you, I dare say, he'll swear an oath that he doesn't. And you'll believe him. I've known women that wouldn't touch such a man with a pair of tongs!"

Having thus finally lost his temper in a swamp of desolation, Blass left his foster-child to her reflections. But he gave her a final well-meant thrust—under the arms, shall we say?—from the farther side of the kitchen-window.

"A man doesn't show vice or virtue, like a woman does," he said. "With a woman you can always tell her record. Now, Sannie, there!—any one can see she's a bit of a brute, nothing worse. But a man! I've known a man preach and drink all his life, with the voice of a saint. The woman'd have shown the drink in six months." He walked away, whistling. "Teunis!" he called, "I'm going back to town."

Greta took her bowl and gathered what she could find of the peas. She smiled, very thoughtfully, as a tear or two stole down her cheeks. The cheeks were healthy, a perfect carnation. The source of tears and smiles also was healthy: discomfited, she harkened to its audible beat.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE level but uneven roads of Holland — so terrible to motors — have but one adversary for the cyclist, a head-wind. There was no breeze of any kind at this broiling June mid-day, nor would Harmen have objected to it, had there been one. He was in a mood to tackle any difficulty, on the wings of his new-found strength. His soul was buoyant; his thoughts were bubbling; his eyes were lighted up. As for the latter, all men know that our women do the switching. Harmen's eyes darkened. He was going home to his mother.

To the man who was not really his father, to the woman who was his mother no more.

At Vrederust it had interested him to discuss the position of affairs with the Notary, and to realize how hopeless it was. There would be barely enough to satisfy Roel Slink, when Blass had got his mortgage back. The fact of that mortgage was now public: Blass had demanded its formal "inscription." The Notary, not as discreet as his appearance, had smiled oddly. Mynheer Blass had originally had very different intentions, the Notary had said, with a queer look at Harmen. The latter grinned with quick inward fierceness. He was down on his back, flat. He would work his way up, as a boy does, bound hand and foot, on his elbows. He would get up somehow, in the teeth of the rich man, Blass. For love's sake. The whole world had changed its colour. Like a great, big sun-break, against a blue-black heaven.

Before leaving the town, he had gone to the Police-

station, passing his head into the ugly lion's maw. He had told the Inspector, politely, that justice must trouble herself to come to Eben-Haëzar, if she wanted the full information that awaited her. For justice, unfortunately, is one of the blind that walk. (Not "progress," a different matter.) Thus she falls into ditches, and drags others after her.

"And you'd better come soon, please," said Harmen, "for we shan't be there long."

"You have honestly thrown a fortune into the poor-bag, and you're ruined?" asked the Inspector.

"You can give the money back to Dominé — what's his name? — Aegidius, and tell him he may safely spend it," said Harmen. "Steven Pols has got it all down for those to see who must."

"Your — uncle has not instituted proceedings against you for assault," said the Inspector. "But, in future, you'd better keep your hands at home."

"So had he," replied Harmen.

"You seem to me a dangerous and disorderly character," said the Man of Order, riled by an uncomfortable intuition that this civil young peasant felt scorn of his Legal Muddle. "I shall communicate with the authorities at Kothen. I had an inquiry about you this morning, through Roel Slink. My reply was unsatisfactory. Take care!"

Thereupon, Harmen departed. He nodded to Aunt Josabé at her window; he couldn't enter that house again, so long as it harboured Roel. Miss Mia came flying after him with Deborah's offers of coffee (hygienic). These it required no effort to decline.

"I tell everybody that you made love to me, but I wouldn't have you," said Miss Mia.

"Do what you can't not-do," replied Harmen in familiar Dutch idiom.

" You should hear Deborah! She says you're your mother's son. What does that mean?"

" It means there are some women — some very few women, I fancy — that like lying for the trouble it makes."

Leaving the young lady to digest this warning, he trundled home. On the way it struck him, that her farewell laugh might not have been quite as artificial as he fancied. For, after all, he *was* his mother's son.

He was — alas for him! Eben-Haëzar lay in a cloud of heat. A mist sank over the brightness of his eyes. Over his heart.

He had always felt towards old Steven as a faithful son should feel. He need honour him no less; in his long-drawn torment, in his sudden disaster, he could reverence him the more. But his mother had been " just mother." All that.

He saw her now in the light of his new love for a pure girl. And the whiter that love flamed up around that white image, the blacker were the shadows which closed in around the woman who, young and fair as other girls, had fallen from woman's high estate. A few days ago he would have deemed it impossible that he could ever learn to judge of womankind as he judged now. He was a farmer's son; he saw nature take its course in the fields. He had laughed, harmlessly enough, with Roel. His mother, his mother, had not distinguished between virtue and vice.

He went into old Steven's sick-room and gave his report. The auction could take place in a week or two. The posters would be up immediately; intending purchasers must view the place.

" They'll all come in here," said old Steven.

" Well, I shan't see them," he said, fondling — he who had never fondled — the dog.

"Take the book away from under my pillow," he said.
"She might find it. Put it back."

"When it's all gone," she asked, creeping in timidly,
"what'll you do?" The son looked away.

"Your fairies'll support us," said Steven. That was his only touch of unkindness. He repented. "I don't mind about that a bit," he said. "It's the Lord's business. I've paid Him. The Lord'll provide." He fetched a deep sigh. "That is happiness," he said.

The wife paused at the door. "Harmen!"

"Yes, mother."

"I've kept you your dinner."

"I don't want any dinner."

"But you must. Say, what's wrong with you?"

"Nothing's wrong with me." He sat down by the bed.

"That isn't true." She went out.

"Better eat your dinner, Harmen," said the old man.
"She's your mother. She cooks well."

"You loved her?" said Harmen.

"In course. In my way. I was a good bit older.
And I never was of the lovery kind. No senti — silly
— what was it Roel used to say?"

"I shall have to get work as a farm-hand."

"It doesn't seem fair that you should work to support me. Your mother's different. But I shouldn't mind parish relief. Not a bit. Isn't that odd? That I should be lying here like this and say Hallelujah!" He turned on one side, towards the shadow. "Take Poker along with you! I can't see what he's about."

Harmen went into the fields with the dog. He gave some orders to the "hand." His mother had worked as usual. He also worked hard, through the long heat of the late afternoon.

Jennie caught him at the milking; she had run him

down. With sudden desperation she approached him, trembling in every feature and every tone.

“Harmen, you are not going away?”

“Away? No, where?”

“Away from home, I mean. To town! Abroad!”

“How could I? And leave you and—father like this?”

“Otherwise you would? You are angry, Harmen, as if it were my fault that we must go from here! But your father gave the money; I should never have done it. I don’t understand about his cruel religion. I never did.”

“Religion keeps people straight,” said Harmen.

“I’m not sure. They go running into swamps, do the religious people. They think any Will-o’-the-Wisp is a sun.”

She filled him with horror. He had been accustomed, all his life long, to her outer conformity. Church-going and fairy-tales. Now her words seemed to come to him as from out a whitened sepulchre. What Will-o’-the-Wisp had drawn her into the orchard? And left her in the swamp?

“It keeps people straight,” he persisted, drawing the white milk from the innocent-faced cow.

“What has your father told you?” She had hoped to keep silence, to await developments; she could not. Anything rather than this murderous strain!

“He has told me nothing I didn’t know before.” The son bent in obedience, still a son, longing for freedom to speak out. “He has paid the money away as a penance; you heard him say so. And now he feels happy; would you grudge him his poor happiness?”

“And I!” she said. “I had one thing I was happy in—your love!”

He took up a pail. “I do my best,” he said.

"I have lost it. I don't know why."

Then he looked at her.

"I told you I didn't love your father, when I married him. Not as I ought. Perhaps I shouldn't have said that much. You men are so hard on us. I was poor. I felt so friendless —"

"There's Suerus coming across the bridge. He wants to see the china," said Harmen. "Are we hard?"

He had no indulgence left for her, nothing but sorrowful aversion. If men are hard, some women are fragile as porcelain. But not all. There are women who take their life and bravely live it, however unlovely it seem!

"I've brought the plate," said Suerus. "Down! Socrates won't look at a dog he doesn't know. Yours is rather a mongrel, eh? I like a good dog. But the wisest are low-born. Like the humans. There are exceptions. Buddha was a king's son. Your Jesus a carpenter's. Oh, I know, I know, my good Vrouw; I mean no offence. Very religious, eh? All women ought to be." Meanwhile he unpacked the plate. "Find the places!" he said triumphantly. "All! If so, I make no charge. Else my charge is — no, I forgot. Want new boots? Or slippers?"

"What is the charge?" asked Harmen, handling the plate. "We're not too poor to pay for honest work."

"It's no affair of mine," answered Suerus, "but I heard the bills were being printed."

"So they are."

"They are?" Suerus shot a keen glance from his kind eyes. He drew Harmen aside. "You've mismanaged that business with Govert Blass?"

"Come and look at the china!" said Harmen.

"Well and good. You've mismanaged it. Both of you; I told him so. He came into my shop about the

books I sent his niece. He's found that out. Just before I came here."

"Was he angry with her?" inquired Harmen, anxiously.

"Pooh! Some Sunday books, and David Copperfield! He doesn't read. Like most of you. But, at least, he thinks. Has some ideas about politics and political economy. And the philosophy of trying to be more reasonable than he was born. That's a great thing." The Jew walked towards the house. "A great thing. I've never achieved it. Let me hope I was born more reasonable, or at least less passion-full than he."

The Vrouw heard; she changed colour.

"Now, where's your china?" said Suerus. "Sock, lie still. Hegel, Sock!" The Jew stumbled over the threshold of the "State Chamber." "Ah!" he cried. "Just so! What a cupboard! And all the same as this piece that I had?"

"But not broken!" said the Vrouw, with swift pride. "Hardly a piece chipped!"

"And how many, all told, did you say?"

"Three hundred and thirty-seven," said the Vrouw.

Suerus stood lost in contemplation. "Oh, draw back the curtains!" he cried. "Make light!" The stuffy room, with its scent of disusedness, seemed to stare at them all, unblinking, in surprise. What business had they here?

Suerus, the philosopher, always had business.

"You don't know what it's worth?" he demanded, at last.

"No," answered mother and son.

"Nor do I." Their faces fell.

"But I might offer you two thousand guilders: I suppose you'd accept?"

They did not respond.

"Dear me!" exclaimed Suerus, much amused. "Not so green as I fancied!"

"It's my grandmother's," murmured the Vrouw.

"Oh, I see."

"Talk sense, Suerus," said Harmen. "If you offer two thousand guilders — all that money! — we begin to ask what you mean?"

"That's sense!" smiled Suerus. "I can't offer two thousand. But it wouldn't be sense, if I did. For the stuff's worth more, I should say, than your whole farm."

"What?" cried mother and son.

"Let's be accurate. Not 'worth,' of course — that's not the word. 'Worth,' if you like, what a fool cares to give for it. Now what was it valued at, when you got it? It must have been valued, Vrouw."

"Twenty years ago, when I got it," said the Vrouw, "it was valued at three hundred and seventy-five guilders."

"Just so — now talk about 'worth.' It's coloured Chinese of the very best period. And such lots of it! You may easily get some so-called amateur — probably an American — to give five thousand dollars at a sale for it!"

The Vrouw sank on to one of the stiff chairs. "Five thousand dollars!" repeated Harmen. The dollar is originally Dutch.

"You'd better sell it," said the Jew. "Twenty years hence, when the craze has gone down, it may be valued at three hundred and seventy-five guilders again."

"Like the — tulips in history," said Harmen, dimly.

"Yes," replied Suerus. "Why, you're wealthy! You leave it in my hands; I shall charge five per cent. You won't get the real 'value'; there's too many go-betweens. But I'll guarantee a small fortune. I showed your plate to Lazarus; went to Overstad on purpose.

I'm only a poor pedlar. It's the quantity! Three hundred and thirty-seven. Three hundred"—he walked out, repeating these figures—"and thirty-seven." In the courtyard he gave Harmen his little parcel. "The ferment for Lievendaal," he said.

"I'll get it there somehow," said Harmen.

"Of course you will. To think of it! Three hundred and thirty-seven!"

CHAPTER XXX

THE supper that night was a strange one, by the old man's bedside. He insisted on having it there. His wife fed him, glad of any break.

"So there's money, is there?" said old Steven, serenely. "Wasn't I right? That the Lord would provide! *Your* money, Jennie. Now I can't work. But you won't like selling your grandmother's things?"

"I don't care. I don't care a bit," said the woman, hastily. "I care about nothing now. I'm glad."

"And, Harmen, you'll believe in the Lord?"

"Yes, oh yes!" replied Harmen, quoting a Dutch proverb. "You've flung out a smelt to catch a pike," he said.

Old Steven shook his blind head. He had much difficulty in accepting the pedlar's estimate.

"I trust Suerus," declared Harmen. "When he says a thing, he knows. He's been to Overstad." The "hand" was sent to the Notary, to stay the posting of the bills.

"So you're rich," said Steven. "I've married an heiress. The farm'll be yours!"

"Don't," said the wife.

As soon as he could, Harmen left them. After Jennie had read the evening chapter. With faltering lips she read it. He wished he could have stopped his ears.

"Good night, mother!" And suddenly he kissed her.

"Come with me! I want to talk. Come to the nightingales!" Her eyes were veiled in tears.

"Not to-night. To-morrow." He would not ask if she still walked along the canal. He fled from his own thought that she did.

He went out into the exquisite evening, with his own pure love singing in his heart.

He took his bicycle. And he called the dog along with him. Poker, in his mongrel fussiness, loved a long run. Perhaps she might still come out to meet him. He should like to show her his dog.

Probably she knew about dogs as she knew about horses. He should like to show her everything connected with himself, the farm, the cows, though they weren't as fine as Blass's. Then again, with the pang he had already got to know, he remembered about his mother. Jennie had not again inquired after Blass's niece. Who was not Blass's niece, to Harmen's grateful satisfaction — no relative in any way of Govert Blass.

By the great copper-beech, where the shadows fell so thick in the early summer evening, stood the Boer-woman, Cupid's messenger.

She held a little note from Greta to say that, for the moment, some other arrangement must be made with Suerus. Said the note: "I shall never forget your kind help. And the nightingales. Be nice to my uncle, until we meet again."

Sannie, who had broken the seal and dirtily closed it up again, found more difficulty in reading what it said than what it didn't say. When she had deciphered the last sentence. "In love with him," scowled Sannie. "That's plain!" Harmen, too modest, yet immediately felt more kindly towards Blass.

The Boer-woman had entirely reversed, within half a day, her simple plan of campaign. From a foe to the assailant she had changed into a friend. Instead

of defending her stronghold she intended to make a good thing for herself by betraying it. It was manifestly hopeless to keep Greta, as an unfailing source of many satisfactions; the girl's inevitable marriage would make Holland an altogether impossible place. Sannie therefore resolved to get enough money out of Harmen for a prosperous return to her own regretted home.

Nothing had ever suited her in the Low Countries except the Schiedam. And these last days she had been much depressed to find her taste for that was going. She felt sick, out of sorts; she had left her queer-smelling dinner untouched. All the afternoon she had sat disconsolately watching her chickens, her only real confidants, compatriots, in so far as the old cock had been acquired, a doomed youngster, from the residue of the steamer's stores, on landing in Europe. She always maintained that you could still recognize the South African origin of the whole family, for—as Blass had pointed out to her—the ladies in their moments of triumphal achievement cackled, “Egg—egg—egg—egg!” in English, all over the courtyard, and the patriarch, in his reckless vain-glory, continued to scream, “Cock'll—do—it—too!” Was Blass right? Who shall say? If he was, the cock was wrong.

“Is there any reply?” said Sannie to Harmen. “What fools you young people are, to write, and not talk.”

“It's only about books from the pedlar,” said Harmen. “I couldn't bring them. Only this parcel. He'll send.”

“But *I'm* not a fool,” said the Boer-woman, sharply. “You come after Juffrouw Greta. Well, why shouldn't you? I like young men to come after girls.”

“You've no business to say that,” began Harmen, annoyed.

"Why not? Plenty of men, young and old, came after me!"

"I don't mean that. I mean—"

"I know what you mean; you mean to get Greta. And I mean to help you, if you make it worth my while."

Harmen called softly to the dog, who was making futile attempts, down the steep bank, to catch he didn't know what, in the water.

"Keep him away! I don't like dogs," said the Boer-woman. "See here, I like Greta. She isn't really happy here, poor motherless girl. I'm her friend."

Harmen suddenly felt he could listen forever. Talk! — talk all you can, you brute! Talk about Greta.

"You did us a bad turn by blabbing," he said.

"Not really!" grinned Sannie. "I brought matters to a head. It's the best way with Blass. He's a bad man, is Blass."

Harmen expressed no audible assent.

"He's the worst kind of bad man, the reformed. The man who's sorry. I suppose that he can't be real bad any longer. He preached, I suppose?"

"No — he scolded."

"Isn't that the same? And he was that loose, I've always heard, with women in his youth!"

"Do you know about his youth?" asked Harmen, apprehensively.

"Not enough. There, you see, how truthful I am! He's a close one. But I know more about him — all the same — than he thinks."

"Greta —" said Harmen. The word jumped to his lips each time he opened them. She caught him.

"And about Greta! I suppose he said Greta was peniless?"

"He did."

"A — a — ah. I know him. I knew he would. Pen-

niless! Of course. And an orphan. He said she was an orphan, eh?"

"He said she had no money and no relatives," answered Harmen restlessly. He didn't want to go, but he didn't want to hear this sort of talk.

"Now, what'll you give me, if I tell you she has both?"

"That depends," said Harmen. He thought she was but half in earnest. To hide his uncertainty he flung a pebble for the dog.

"If she's got a father, she'll want that father's consent," said the Boer-woman. "But she'll also want that father's support." The woman jingled something in her loose pocket. It was keys, for Greta provided her with anything she needed, except cash.

"If you really want to say something, I wish you would say it," remarked Harmen.

"I *have* said. What'll you give?"

"Give for what?" His voice trembled.

"I can help you to a thousand English pounds with Greta," said the Boer-woman, brutally, "but you must make it worth my while. Promise me fifty pounds—now, that isn't much!—fifty, and I'll supply you with the proof you need. Nobody else'll do it."

"Proof of what?" shouted Harmen.

"Proof that Greta is Govert's own child and has a thousand pounds of her own."

He turned to her. She stumbled back. The bicycle creaked under his arm.

"You lie!" he faltered. "You horrible, foul-mouthed thing!"

But Sannie was not one that took inconvenient offence.

"Don't talk nonsense," she said. "Don't waste time. What'd be the sense of my inventing? I know the dis-

trict — it isn't Trikkelstroom — where the whole thing's down in the register. I knew the woman — she's dead. I know where the thousand pounds are. Niece? What niece could she be, pray? Govert Blass was an only child. Give me a promise of fifty, in writing, and I'll get you all the proof you need — more."

"You lie!" he repeated blindly. "You lie!"

"You're a fool," said the Boer-woman, with contempt. "Go home and think about it. Send me your promise. Bring it. She's sweet on you. Why should I lie? But when she's married — as marry she must — I want to get away from here."

He leaped on to his bicycle: he called to the dog: yes, he had the sense to call Poker, who had sniffed and snuffed through the gate.

"You might give me something for my trouble," she whined.

He flung her a dollar, all he had with him. He fled. He fled through the silver night air, as if this were the night of all the witches. As if they were after him, after him, to drive him away out of himself.

CHAPTER XXXI

TO escape from the one evil no man ever can escape from. Himself.

To escape. Out of the flaming prison of his own consciousness. The seething, agonizing, enclosing pain. Into some impossible emptiness of non-feeling, non-knowing. A consciousness of unconsciousness, the sole futile hope of relief.

When he came to himself — not, certainly, out of oblivion, but out of frenzy — he was far away, in the summer night, on the dark fields. The dog was with him, yelping. Half frightened, the creature licked Harmen's hand. The bicycle was gone. He remembered now that he had fallen with it, down a ditch, in his wild rush across country, his dash off the high-road on which, possibly, nay probably, he might encounter Blass.

Blass, gone, as usual, to greet Jennie. Love number one; nay, love number how much? Somewhere, at any rate, before Greta's mother. And a good bit after, still.

He wanted to hark back for the bicycle. His peasant instinct bade him do that. He couldn't remember where he had been, how he had come thus far. Where was he now? He gazed around, in the deep blue. His initials were on the machine. Some one would find it, smashed. That he now lost his thought, his care, for it, almost immediately, proves him utterly distraught.

He stood consumed by the ravening fire that raged, red-hot within him. A cloud of lurid, scalding smoke. And he called on its density to stifle his thought, in vain. It flared up, biting and smarting: it played with him, endlessly, as he cried!

He ran on, stumbling, to escape, with the dust over his torn clothes. The dog leaped up, barking, against his hand, as they ran. This thought that was at his heart — he must leave it behind him. He must run so fast: he must reach a stage where it could not follow. He must pause for breath, when he had got away from it. There it was.

Unexpectedly he found himself in the more wooded part near his own home. He had swept round, in a half circle, through several miles of meadow and scrub. Through places he didn't know, against a hedge or two, a grim garden wall. But now he was in the woods, where, since childhood, he walked, evening upon evening, with his mother. At dead of night, now, in the lonely, silent woods. Nay, hark! — the nightingales were singing. Over yonder in the distance, and here, replying from the darkness — to right and left — hark, just above! He ran into the open. He paused, encircled with song.

Out in the alien fields, amongst the slumbering kine, he had lifted his impotent fist to the sky, and cursed the Maker who makes us thus. Who welcomes us, when the god-like hunger awakens in us for honest love and human sympathy, and who, suddenly, gorges us with horror and sin. It is then we go forth, crying for the daily bread of our affections: before we are aware, we lie crushed beneath the stones of the abyss. "It is bread!" cried Harmen, hardly knowing what he was saying. "It is bread! It is bread!"

Here in the wood, amongst the familiar nightingales, he dropped, for one moment, his face on his hands. "Love is love," he said. "God cannot alter it. Oh, my God! Oh, my God!" And he wandered away through the orchard, shuddering from head to foot.

Yes, he had brought the dog back. That was enough.

He had done his duty. Now he could go. He must leave the old home.

He was eager to leave it. He loathed its horrible name. The old folks didn't need him now: they had money. The old folks that were as little the old folks, as the old home was the old home.

For the old man, who was no longer his father, he felt no less affection and much more fondness than of yore. But the old man had spoken. Nothing could make undone, for either of them, the daily discomfort of that once spoken word.

And his mother? She was still his mother. Many leagues may part them, so many that there be no risk of such a spoken word between them, that she may remain — their only chance! — his mother still.

But what mattered all such considerations, compared with the one overwhelming command! He must fly. Not from himself: that is foolishness. The wildest of those wild motor things cannot carry you out of yourself. He must fly from temptation, from fresh attraction, from memory, in time. He must get away; to new scenes, strange surroundings. He must look a clean world in the face again — in time; and not see it blood-red.

The dog had slunk after him. He went back and put the tired beast, with a few gentle words and pats, in the shed. Without a glance of farewell he turned, choking, from the fields where the cattle lay. But he waited, one moment, before the feebly lighted window, behind which his mother watched. Old Steven slept, a sleep of unfathomable peace.

Harmen whistled, under his breath, as he went. He didn't know what he whistled: he didn't know how he was going. But he knew whither. Away.

From the bottom of his angry heart he pitied Govert

Blass. What must that wretched man's remorse be now! The evil that begets evil, in unexpected places, as a flighty hen lays eggs! Leaving them until they stink. And then, before we know it, the stain is there forever, on white hearts, and innocent homes.

He must hasten away, for his own sake, and no less for Greta's, if it be true, as God grant it be not, that she felt towards him — what the Boer-woman had said. What his own heart had whispered. Whatever happened, one thing remained his manly duty. She must think him a brute, a coward — anything, provided she despise him. They must never come near each other again.

As God grant —? Why, the very serpent in their breasts was of God's implanting. They must look to themselves for help against its fang, not to God.

"I will," he said aloud. He felt the happier for saying it. And he knew that he could, if only he got away, far away. He was a man: he could.

He stood by the railway-dyke, stopped. A long line of trucks, an endless coal-train, waited, drowsy, along the embankment, in the darkness, with the engine uselessly gasping at the distant Kothen station-shed. The whole thing looked deserted, permanently derelict, but presently it would rumble on, towards Overstad. He clambered over the side of an open waggon and stretched himself, low down, amongst a load of coke-sacks.

He lay back, hiding; he piled up some of the grimy bags around him. And he lifted his hot face to the softly breathing night, to the widely twinkling stars. A man's call came from the far lights about the platform, a steam-whistle's responsive shriek; then the creaking caterpillar lumbered slowly ahead. The dark mass of the woods fell back: the station-lights glittered huge and glimmered out. There was only night, and warmth, and softness; and the rhythmic jolt of the progressing

train. He dozed, dazed. Had there not been the shake and shout of the intervening stations, he might have slept. For youth, in great stress and consequent decision, sleeps readily on the resolve.

A great calm as of sunrise deepened on his awakening strenuousness, his newly-fixed intent. The near duty was plain to him. He must blot out at all cost the memory of himself at Lievendaal. After that his own life must come right, as it could.

His purpose had blazed up, the moment he had seen the waiting goods-train. It had been clear at once, and remained clear, like a set harbour-light. He understood that it had been his purpose from the first. He would go to Overstad, and, with hasty deliberation, take the inevitable, the irretrievable step.

He stretched himself on his rugged and grimy bed. It was a wonderful journey through the paling twilight. The morning awoke, and such birds as sleep in darkness began to sing. His heart also was lightened, took courage, gained strength. At one of the small stations a lad, some sort of cleaner, passed along, whistling loudly a street tune of the moment. Silly words, as Harmen knew, about the "Sweetheart, that will not forget me." Harmen frowned.

The train crept into Overstad. The city is a big one, as cities go with Harmen Pols. He began to weigh possibilities of unnoticed exit from the unset trap he had so easily entered, but even before the slowing line of miscellaneous vehicles had stopped, a hand was laid on his shoulder, and a voice said: "Caught."

Harmen turned on one shoulder, half smothered in the sacks.

"I had my eye on you," said the guard of the goods-train. "You can't travel for nothing on this line."

"Well, if I've got to pay for my journey, you might

have helped me to a better seat," said Harmen Pols.

"Serve you right. Pay me your fare now, and I'll let you off."

"I haven't got any money," replied Harmen, much ashamed.

"So I thought. Stowaways seldom have. Come along with me to the station-master."

For one moment he wanted to plead with the man, say he'd send double to-morrow, offer his watch — then his pride refused, with a glance at the guard's unprepossessing jowl. "Take me to the office," he said. "I was in a hurry. I'm not a thief."

The head-official met them on the platform. It was still very early, a clear summer morning. There were few people about. The station shimmered in its strange mixture of man-made dirt and nature-born radiance. "How's this?" spat the responsible head, abrupt, not ungenial, but very responsible. A big head, even a swelled head, as little heads are apt to be. A man short of figure and of speech. Not a man, inside the station. Only a head.

"This is the one thing we can't allow," spat the station-master, scornfully eyeing the bedraggled, besprinkled peasant. "You can't travel for nothing on this line."

"Except it's to prison!" hazarded the guard — an after-thought.

"Make your jokes to your equals, Bonk," smashed the station-master. "As long as you're on duty, Bonk."

"Yes, sir," said the guard, humbly.

"The joke's a good one," admitted the chief, mollified. "And he *has* travelled to prison, unless he can pay. The fare and the fine. What's your name? Where's your home?"

"Harmen Pols. Son of —" he checked himself.

"Well — haven't you got a father you can own to?"

"Steven Pols, Peasant Proprietor," said Harmen, resolutely. He faced the others, the three or four idlers hovering near. Bedraggled, besprinkled, he looked every inch the man he was.

"Peasant Proprietor! Dear me! Then, what on earth is the meaning of this?" The station-master's voice rang out hoarse with irritation. "You haven't got a halfpenny about you? What are you running away from? I don't want to give you in charge. Have you any references in Overstad?"

"No," said Harmen, with sudden devilry. "I've only the Police Inspector at Vrederust."

"Dubbelduif? I know him. I will telephone to him." The station-master turned away. One of the idlers had come forward, from behind another's back.

"Speelop, I know this — gentleman," said the cheery, yet astonished voice of Roel Slink. Speelop was the name of the station-master, and Roel Slink and he had been corporals together at Overstad. The man was of course a Vice, an Under-head, Semi-chief, doubly responsible. "You are here early!" said Roel, stepping forward. "Nephew!"

"And you late, I presume," was the nephew's reply.

"Insolent boy!" laughed Roel. "Do you want me to spank you? What are you running away from, pray? — as the station-master says."

He caught a look of Harmen's eyes; he turned hastily to Speelop, half a dozen huge rounds of silver on one outstretched palm. "Pay yourself," he said. "I mean, pay your dem' government. This young man's made a night of it. So have I."

He went back to Harmen; he put his arms through his "nephew's," and drew him away forcibly. "Don't be a fool," he said. "Come and tidy yourself up a bit! Let's get out of this!"

CHAPTER XXXII

“**T**HAT’S better,” said Roel, as Harmen emerged, somewhat cleansed, on to the Station Square. “It was sensible to stick to your cap. Whatever frolic you get into, never part with your head-gear.”

“I am obliged to you for lending me that money,” said Harmen. “But now, don’t, please, spy on me. I don’t on you.”

“Oh, you may!” laughed Roel. “You were quite right. I *was* here, late! Came over about that pub, and missed my train. I’m sorry to say I’ve done it before.”

“You treat her badly,” said Harmen, gentle in his own wretchedness. “You shouldn’t do that.”

“I do,” answered Roel. “And, if you people leave us alone, I dare say I shall treat her better. I must get away from Deborah, and settle down to the idea of Mrs. Slink. What’s this about your mother having come into a lot of money? Suerus says you’ll pay me all right?”

“Suerus? Has he been blabbing to you?” exclaimed Harmen, amazed.

“Not exactly. I met him on my way to the station. He was quite excited, for a philosopher. And very nervous about the police, like all his kind. He said you’d have plenty to pay me. Well, that’s all I care about. You don’t look particularly happy, though.”

“You can have the money, but be good to Aunt Carlina,” said Harmen. “Don’t let’s make more wretchedness in the world than we can help.”

"Now, that's entirely my theory. So unlike old Steven's. Or your mother's, though I've heard it from her lips. What parent did you get it from?"

"Roel, I don't know my way about this place. Whereabouts is the Guard House?"

"The — Guard House?"

"Yes: I may as well ask you as a stranger."

"The Guard House! I'll take you there. Are you going to enlist? For India? You look like it." Roel's eyes sparkled with excitement. "Don't turn up at the Guard House penniless. Let me lend you some money."

"Thanks. Do we go down here? I should like a cigar, Roel. Though once I said I wouldn't take one from you."

"Let bygones be bygones, as far as possible," said Roel.

"I'm sorry I struck you. Before I light this cigar, you can hit me back, if you like."

"Thank you. I still have my little revolver! Perhaps you would like me to use that?"

"There's worse things than being killed, sudden," said Harmen. His careless companion respected the tone of his voice. They walked on through the streets, scarcely troubled at that hour, yet distracting to Harmen, with number and diversity; width, tramway-complications, spreading work-people, milk.

"My father is blind; have you heard that?" said Harmen. "He will have to give up the farm, as farm. They must sell the cows, let the land, live quietly in the house. That is all. And I am going abroad for a bit, to see life. Don't gossip more about us than you can account for. Especially not about my mother."

"I have always thought you were Blass's son," replied Roel, bluntly. "Why don't you make up to his niece?"

"Roel Slink," answered Harmen, with quiet wrath, "you would be a good fellow, if you weren't such a cad."

"My dear Harmen, when you have worn the Queen's uniform a month, you will be able to distinguish between pleasantry and impertinence. I hope the experience won't cost you worse than a black eye."

"I am only a peasant," said Harmen. "You never were: you're city-bred. But *I* say, a cad's a fellow that hurts people, without any sense or reason for doing it."

"Well, my reason's always been to help you. To get something, a good deal, out of Blass. No offence! 'Tis a wise child that knows its own father. You've got a strange look of him. Hardly as much as a likeness. Does he still drive past of evenings?"

"Are we near the Guard House?" questioned Harmen.

"That is it, over yonder, on the square. Do you know how to manage with these people? Shouldn't I go on with you? I suppose you fully realize what you're about?"

"I do," said Harmen.

"Something amazing must have happened! Carlina must find out and tell me. Unless you would be so good?" pleaded Roel.

"You forget how often you've advised me to 'see life,'" answered Harmen.

"Well, you seem to be seeing it. Yes, I think you ought to have served your term. But at Overstad, not in the Colonies. Flirtations in a uniform steady a man for after-life."

Harmen smiled bitterly, but Roel only grinned outright. "I'm much steadier," he said, "than I ever thought I would be. Why, I've married Carlina." He walked on a few steps, contemplating his own fate. Then he said —

"Don't be a fool, Harmen, in any case! Don't begin in a hurry anything that lasts very long. *I* was too quick about marrying Carlina. And I thought I'd reasoned it all out." He added, "I knew about the money, but I didn't know how boney her cheeks were."

"Bonnie?" said Harmen: the words are hardly distinguishable in Dutch.

"I said: boney. Don't be brutal to me, Harmen. And don't be brutal to yourself. Come away home."

Harmen stood still, on the great square, in the light and shade of the chestnut-trees. A wide glint of summer spread around him, playful amongst the softly gathering heat.

"I must get away," he said. "I have thought it out. Don't worry me. They won't want me at home now. I must get away — far away — for a time."

"I do believe that, like Suerus, you're afraid of the police!"

Harmen unconsciously straightened his shoulders and smiled at the smaller, lighter man.

"My hands are as clean," he said, "as — as Dominé Aegidius's"; and he walked into the Guard House, leaving Roel gaping outside.

The sergeant at the Guard House didn't care about clean hands, in recruits. What he liked was, strong. He gave all information with alacrity, demanded the necessary papers, offered a pecuniary advance. This latter Harmen declined, having already resolved to pawn his (silver) watch. He came away, two-thirds caught and one-third captivated, full of a flamboyant future he regretfully disbelieved. Roel, who had sat down before a Café, ran after him, found him hopelessly uncommunicative, and reluctantly returned to a retentive glass of beer.

Harmen strayed till his feet lagged, in the haze of

the great city. He stared at things he didn't care about, lots of them, sights that might otherwise have attracted him; he turned right and left, went to look closer, merely that he might not think, for a moment, the thought he never lost sight of, the sweet thought that had suddenly become a sin. A horrible, unutterable, unthinkable, sin. Yonder, in the East, was a new world, where nothing would look as it did here. A new world: that was his one chance. Yourself so quite different that you're almost another self. He was not doing the best: he was doing the only possible thing.

He reached a park which, as he had noticed, led round to the station. He sat down on a rustic seat. In his pocket were the few guilders he had obtained for his watch.

When he glanced up, from slow scrutiny of his own boots, his eye caught an advancing figure he had not expected and still less desired to see. Old Suerus came pottering along towards the distant station, with a forward slope which seemed to call for the missing cart and dog. Harmen hastily sunk his lids, sitting still.

"You here?" said old Suerus, in an accent that cared. Harmen flung up his eyes again. They were so dark: could they scowl?

"You?"

"I constantly come," said Suerus, quietly. "On business. I have been to Lazarus again about that china of yours. I'm not satisfied with him. I feel sure we can get a great deal more for it."

"The more, the better," said Harmen.

Old Suerus sat down beside him, though he hadn't made room.

"Quite so," replied Suerus. "Money is a desirable thing."

“ You’re a philosopher,” said Harmen, wishing he’d move on.

“ Read my little book,” said the Jew. “ I shall convert you yet. When you’ve need of it.” He carefully looked away.

Harmen kicked a pebble.

“ I do not always sleep by night,” continued Suerus. “ But I always lie in bed. I find it suits me best.”

“ You needn’t look at me like that,” said Harmen; the Jew was staring in the opposite direction. “ I fell into a ditch.”

“ Why not keep to the road? Especially in the dark,” said the Jew.

“ There’s ditches right across some roads,” said Harmen. “ Down you go. All of a sudden. Straight to hell.”

The Jew turned with a rush, and placed one thin hand on his neighbour’s broad knee. “ You clodhopper!” he exclaimed. “ I always said there was a little more in you, just a little more, than in most clodhoppers. If I can do anything for you, tell me. If not, I will go.”

“ I lost my bicycle in the ditch,” said Harmen. “ You can’t help me. I’ve lost everything else.”

“ Except the money,” softly suggested the Jew. Philosopher though he was, there seemed comfort in that thought to him; the mystery of the poor-bag left him irritably inquisitive.

“ Yes,” said Harmen. “ Gold for love.” He rose. “ I must get back,” he said. “ I must take leave of my mother. Heaven only knows how I shall manage to do it. I’m going away. Quite far. To see the world. And to forget.”

“ He has asked some girl — Greta — to marry him, and she has refused him,” thought the Jew. It seemed

a small thing, even at its worst, to call up such a still agony as he saw in the young peasant's face. He must have guessed wrong. Besides, a man doesn't lose *everything*, not a strong man like this, because, for the moment, he has bruised, as the Dutch say, one shin.

"Whatever you do," said old Suerus, impetuously, trembling from head to foot, half holding on to Harmen's coat-sleeve, "don't lose your faith, as I did. That's illogical. God must make sense."

"Have you ever seen cats?" asked Harmen, in going. "Of course you've seen cats. I hate cats: they play with mice."

CHAPTER XXXIII

IT was almost mid-day, when Harmen again reached Eben-Haëzar. He had walked from Vrederust.

“Harmen!—we have been so anxious!” exclaimed his mother. She stood among her chickens—white, all of them. They clucked ceaselessly over her handfuls of grain.

“Oh, we have been so anxious!” she said.

“I am sorry,” answered Harmen.

“But your father said it’d be all right.” She smiled wanly. “He trusts you more easily than I do.”

Harmen stood gazing at her patient face. All his anger was gone since yesterday, gone, not as a dead thing vanished, but as a slain thing, vanquished. No thought was left in him towards his erring mother now but tenderness and pity—tenderness and pity and awe. Love, the most guilty, is a piteous and a sacred thing. Who are we, in our hourly uncertainty of evil, to scoff at crime, where we should rather weep for pain? Suddenly, as in the twinkle of an eye, his own life had taught him the lesson of her long endurance. Suddenly, as on the brink of an abyss, he had seen her struggling amongst the thorny branches, and already he was down in the deepest depth of mortal guiltiness, with hands blackened and bleeding, and yet, as he had cried—clean.

“I am a thousand times more evil than she,” he said.
“Poor, poor thing!”

“I am sorry,” he spoke aloud.

She imagined him still to be replying to her reproach.

"It is nothing," she said. "When you remain away for a few hours, I am frightened."

"No," he said. "I am sorry, very sorry, for all I have said and done, these last days."

She turned pale. She put her hand to her brow, standing, in the brilliant light, against the cool screen of the lindens.

"I have learnt so much," he said hastily. "In one night. All of a sudden. School's no use. Church isn't. It's what we learn, in ourselves. I used to think people were always bad, when they went wrong. But it isn't so. Why, a mortal can do bad as bad can be, mother, and yet feel good and clean!" He pleaded plaintively, with himself and with her. He held out both hands, as if to clinch his argument: they fell by his sides.

"Yes," she said vaguely, much troubled.

"We're like the pigs, mother. Everybody always says they'd like to be clean, but everybody leaves them in the dirt. We're the pigs, in this world, in God's sty. You think you're on clean litter, and suddenly it's all filth! It may be your own doing, and it may not. Mine wasn't."

He paused; then, with a slight effort, because of the cruel kindness of the thing —

"Yours can't have been. Oh, mother, love is terrible. I'm going away for a little. You mustn't mind that."

"Going! Away?"

"Only for a couple of years. Not for long, you know. I want to see something of life."

"Going! Where?"

"To the Indies, as a soldier. They say it's great fun. You come back with a medal."

"To the fighting? Are you mad, or I, Harmen?"

What has happened? You would leave us? What has he said to you, Harmen? What has your father said?"

He stuttered, fell back. She was close upon him, in the fell light, in the heat.

"Let me look into your eyes," she breathed. "Let me look into your heart!"

"We will ask him," faltered Harmen. "I don't think he'll disapprove. He feels satisfied—"

"You are my son!" she cried. "I can't live without you — not a day! Insult me — if you will! — hurt me! — strike me! I won't complain. I deserve it. I haven't complained! But stay with me! Stay and comfort me, even when you hurt me, for God's sake, for your pity's sake — for the human, helpful pity in your heart, Harmen! Oh, mine's been an awful life! — a life of agony! I haven't talked of it: I haven't complained: I couldn't! There was nothing to be done, nothing to change! But I've had you! You! You've been my rainbow in the storm, Harmen! God's promise that I wasn't altogether lost to Him. God's pity! Oh Harmen, the rainbow! The rainbow, oh God!" She sank back as if she would have fallen, but she righted herself, amongst the pecking chickens, and stood straight.

"Oh, don't, mother! Help *me*; it's your help I need. I love you. I am sorry. Oh, so sorry. Only sorry — now. But I can't live any more in the same neighbourhood as Blass."

She thrilled. She made an attempt to speak, but was still.

"And as Greta," he said suddenly, feeling that he owed her all.

She was silent yet, but a faint change of expression mantled her clear cheek, almost a tinge of pleasure, of hope!

"I know since yesterday," he continued with deepen-

ing desperation, "that she is not Blass's niece, but his child."

"I do not think that is true," said Jennie, in calmer tones. "I believe it to be a lie."

"There is plenty of proof," said Harmen.

"There often is. But I believe this to be a lie." She was watching a soaring bird — a swallow.

"The woman can name the parish register: she knew the mother: she has all the facts!"

"Still, it is a lie. I do not think it is true."

"You believe in him still?"

Her gaze swept down to her son, as the swallows swoop. Her eyes were ablaze with terror.

"Why do you ask me that? And in such a voice. There are tears in it! Yes, I believe in him — now. Yes, though I — almost wish it were true."

"You wish it were true? Mother, do you dream of what you say? You wish it were true! — and I —"

He could get no further. He watched, in inexorable anguish, her heaving breast. The dog had run out, with a beast's merciful ignorance of contiguous tragedy, scattering the chickens, rubbing against his master's legs.

The mother, stabbed straight in the bosom, burst into terrible weeping.

"And you! And you! What you? Because — And she! You are flying — you would go to the East; you would seek death, because — because — It isn't true, yet if it were — Oh, my God, I can endure no longer! Come with me, Harmen — down, Poker! Come, Harmen! Let us go to him: I must speak with him! Oh come, Harmen! Come quick!" She hastened; she tripped over the threshold; the dog barked.

"Is dinner ready?" said old Steven from the bed.

She knelt down beside him.

"Are you there?" he asked. "Is anything wrong?" But the question betrayed no agitation: his sightless visage was composed, colder than ever, and serene.

"I am here," she said. "Harmen too. He has come back." Her voice was stilled from its fierce sobbing, clear again, as when clouds pass from glass.

"He has come back, but he wants to go away again. To go far. If we would believe him, he cannot stay with us. He has come back to say good-bye. But we will not let him go, father — eh?" She looked up at the sightless eyes. If she had expected vehement protest such as hers, she was disappointed. Steven only said, "Yes."

"*You* understand me," said Harmen. "When I tell you all, you will quite understand."

But she fought them both. She was at bay, against the limit of her endurance, hunted down, after all these years of compromise, and she turned.

"Steven, what have you told my son?" she said. A sudden purple overspread her face and neck, a colour so strange they had never seen it before. "Do not speak!" she added swiftly. "Let me say it! He has betrayed you. I do not want to hear it — at the last — from your lips."

"Leave it unspoken!" he interrupted; his serenity was gone, but not as in former days. His face worked, but with compassionate grief.

She rose to her feet. "You have told him that he is the son of Govert Blass!"

Harmen, motionless by the door, gasped aloud.

"It is not so, Harmen. You are not Blass's son."

"What!" exclaimed Steven. "After all these years, all our wretchedness, all my doubt — after the money is gone, the expiation — gone, you tell me now, you have been a faithful wife to me — honest and true?"

She shrank back, involuntarily, against the folds of the green curtain, in the heat and dusk of the partly shaded room.

"No," she said, "You must keep calm, Harmen; you must have patience. No, I have not been a faithful wife to you, Steven."

"I knew it — all along; why acknowledge it now?" His voice was schooled; his eyes were sightless. Less than ever could those with him pierce through his mask.

"The time has come to admit it, lest worse ensue. All my life I have loved Govert: I have loved him only. I cannot help it. God knows I couldn't. I loved him, when I threw him over, so that he might marry, as he promised to do, the woman he had wronged before he knew me. We were engaged, and I heard of it — he was wild in those days — and we parted. He would have come back from Transvaal for her and the child, but they died. Both died. It was too late then!"

"I saw you in the orchard!" cried Steven.

"Yes, that was where we parted. I loved him. Purely, as the world talks. I have loved him ever since. The feeling is there still. Though, of course, it is different. For I am nearly an old woman. And he is no longer young."

"But, mother, why say these things?" pleaded Harmen, tremulous between hope and sorrow.

"Why? That there be an end! That the whole truth be clear between us, now that these thoughts, Harmen, have arisen in your heart! No, you are not his child, Harmen; you need not fly to the East from *that!* No, I have not been your faithful wife, father! Oh, that we had both lain dead, before you knew it!"

"I have always known it. I deemed the child his. Now I hardly understand."

"Yes, you understand! It were better not to have

spoken, to have gone on to the end. After death we see different. You were right. In such things, between those once married, the fear is better than the certainty! But Harmen has made it impossible — oh, not through your fault, dear one! I am not as other wives, Steven, but, when I married you — God hears me in Heaven! — I thought the old love was dead. In the orchard it woke again. All the rest has been sin."

"You are as good as the best of them!" cried Harmen.

"Ah, no, son!" she said, sadly and sweetly. "He wrote from yonder, once only, to say that the woman and his child were dead, here, before he could have come back for them, that he had adopted an orphan out there, that he never would — love any one but — me. His niece I knew this Greta couldn't be, for Govert was an only child."

"So Sannie said!" cried Harmen.

"That is nearly twenty years ago, Steven. Since then we have never written or spoken. Except once, when he wrote and asked if he might come back, come to Lievendaal and live there. Our lives seemed over. I said, yes. I am a frail woman. I couldn't help myself. That was my sin."

She pushed away the dog. She lifted herself up: she seemed taller.

"My sin!" she said. "My whole life has been sin. Ever since I went to church with you. When you spoke of love to me, when you kissed me, I thought of *him*! When I thought of Harmen, I thought of *him*! When you read the Bible, what the Lord says of marriage, of adultery, I thought of *him*. You know now, why I never went with you to the Table, shrinking back, letting you sit there alone! Oh, the awful, awful verses in Matthew — so awfully, terribly true! A hundred times

I have read them with tears and shudderings, every letter of them is burned into my brain."

"Mother, you wrong yourself!" cried Harmen.

"No," she said. "God wrongs me. I have tried to think that there wasn't any God, tried to think the words weren't true. Tried to believe in kind fairies only. But it's true, it's true! I am an adulteress, by every word of the Lord's teaching. My whole life has been a long life of adultery. Every thought of love in my heart — even about you, Harmen — has been a thought of adultery and of shame!"

"It is true, and I have known it," said Steven, in the silence. "We have borne it together. We have expiated it. Both."

She was tearless. But her eyes shone liquid with tender memory and exquisite regret. She wondered, would she ever have found courage to speak thus much, to cause such pain, had the sightless countenance still met hers with immediate reply?

"It was worth the price," she said, her lips only moving, not a sound on the listening air. "I love him still."

"It is over now," said Steven. "All over and past. God has forgiven us. We can bear our punishment — gladly."

"But I am not punished!" she cried.

"Yes, my punishment is my blindness, and yours that you see."

"Them's not punishments!" exclaimed Harmen, with new impetuosity. "It's teachings; Suerus is right. To make us love and understand each other. And pity. Teachings that give us hearts. Before last night I hadn't an idea people could love so much! And be so sorry for each other's guilt!" He held out both arms in most unwonted abandonment, every movement and in-

flexion were full of the sinner's sympathy with the sinning.

"Guilt," said Jennie, sternly. "Yonder," she pointed in the direction of the "State-Chamber," "lies the great, hard, silver-clasped Book! Unfasten the clasps, and the pages will open at the place. When Harmen — before Harmen was born, I have lain there for hours, with my hand on the words; they are burnt into my soul. And afterwards, often. No more now: it was useless. I dread the Chamber. The clasps hold. Unfasten them, it will fall open at the place."

"You have done all you could," said Stephen. "More. It is a hard saying, 'Whosoever shall look!'"

"Every evening have I looked," she said, in liquid accents. "Oh the sweetness of it! The sin of it! I have never spoken or written a word. All these years have I sinned — sinned, sinned, daily, nightly, ever and always — and rejoiced in my sorrowful sin!"

"Spare me!" said Steven, gently.

"Indeed, and I would beg your forgiveness on my knees: I would do, daily, the cruellest penance. What were the use? Nothing has any use."

"It has filled my whole youth with tenderness," cried Harmen. "It has given me the sweetest, gentlest mother that ever mortal had!" His tongue seemed loosed, strange words came to him in the pure humanity that flooded his soul.

"But you will not go," she said. "*That* punishment would be beyond my bearing. See, to keep you I have sacrificed everything — sacrificed the silence of years!"

The hired hand's flat face was peering in, like a dull moon, at the window. He could just reach its lowest pane.

"Some one's asking to see you!" called the hand, in

the long-drawn twang of his province. He addressed himself to Harmen alone.

The latter looked out at the window: by craning his neck, he could catch a glimpse of Blass standing in the courtyard.

“We don’t want anything,” he answered, proud of his presence of mind. “Wait, I’ll tell him myself,”— and he hurried out.

“I am an adulteress,” said Jennie: and it was as if she found relief in the repeated utterance — at last — of the truth. “All these years of our married life I have lived in adultery. In adultery. You could have divorced me daily. Your Bible says you might. Daily. I am the woman taken in adultery, to whom the Lord said, ‘Sin no more’; and she went back and sinned. And sinned.”

“It is true,” answered Steven. He lifted his veiled eyes to her: he opened his arms, as their son had done. And she sank into them, as she had not sunk into Harmen’s.

CHAPTER XXXIV

“I HAVE wronged you,” said Govert Blass. “Up to a point.” Clean-shaven, smartly clothed, with a glitter of spurs, and a smell of leather, he stood in the centre of the light-bespangled court-yard. The sun broke through the lindens. The chickens spluttered, the dog lapped noisily at a puddle.

“Up to a point,” said Govert Blass. “Let us be accurate. In the place I come from, people are quick to injure, and quick to forgive. They shoot, as that woman said, and they shake hands.” Harmen noted “that woman” with some surprise.

Blass flicked his gaiter with his whip. In covert curiosity he studied the young man’s bedraggled appearance. “He’s been up all night,” reflected the corn-factor. “Sitting up with his father? No. For he’s been out all night.”

“Your father is better?” asked Blass.

“He feels little pain. But his sight is gone.”

Blass did not answer: his eyes, that could see, wandered thankfully round the yard.

Harmen stood watching the man with no longer militant but still hostile gaze.

“You wished to speak to me,” he said at last; then as he observed the other’s embarrassed manner: “If there is anything I can do for you, I shall be very glad to do it.”

Govert smiled: a sudden lighting up of his serious face.

“I haven’t come for that. I’ve come to ask you to

forgive me. Let us be fair, mind. I was only wrong up to a point. See here, Pols, we must look at the question squarely, fairly, logically. You *did* come sneaking round my place, and you *were* after my niece."

"I haven't denied it. I boasted of it," said Harmen. He added quickly: "To you."

"Well, she isn't my niece, and she hasn't got a cent. You intend to come after her still?"

"Yes," said Harmen.

"But you don't believe about the poverty. You know better."

"Mynheer Blass," said Harmen, colouring, "I don't want to be rude to you, but it seems to me, you don't quite know when you're apologising to a man and when you're insulting him."

To his horror Blass laughed. Was that what this serious-eyed man had come here for?

"Is that your dog?" said Blass. "I like mongrels: they've the wit and the pluck of the lower orders. Too long a pedigree isn't good for man or beast."

"Well, I prefer a legitimate birth," thought Harmen, trying to dislike the man.

"I like any dog. I can't keep from playing with them," continued Blass, carelessly. "So does Greta. But we couldn't have them at Lievendaal: Sannie was too afraid of their getting at her fowls. That'll alter now."

"Seems to me you can't keep from playing with any one!" exclaimed Harmen.

"Am I playing? If so, it's sheer nervousness. I'm a shy man, Pols, though nothing but your charge would have made me own to it. Very unreasonable it would be of me. I came to tell you that I've found out about Sannie. She's gone."

Harmen's heart jumped, but he waited.

"Well, what do you say to that?"

"I don't know what you have found out."

"How much, you mean. I like that. Don't turn on her. She's down. You gave her a dollar last night. I found her dead drunk in the middle of the road."

"So it was my fault," said Harmen.

"Your doing. She sent Teunis at once to the neighbours for drink. She says she was just mad with the need of it. If my horse hadn't shied, I should have gone right over her. I wasn't looking out."

In the tone of the last words, Harmen realized acute self-condemnation, which had probably done Sannie's cause no good.

"It's disgusting to think how often a beast shows more sense than a man," added Blass. "Greta says Sannie used to try to make her hens drunk. She never succeeded twice running with the same."

"Shouldn't we step out of the sun?" said Harmen, who was beginning to think Blass must indeed be very shy.

"Sun? You call this sun? I haven't seen the sun since I left South Africa. There I agree with Sannie. Well, she'll bask in it soon."

"You have turned her out?" questioned Harmen, in sudden pity.

"I drove her across to Vrederust this morning, to a Servants' Home. She won't like that. Religious. She needn't stay long. But I couldn't trust Greta's good heart. I shall look after Sannie. She must go back. She wants to."

They had taken a few steps, out of the glare of the yard. They had come round unconsciously, where they would be plainly seen from the side of the house.

"She wasn't a nice woman," said Harmen.

"You think it stupid of me not to have noticed that?

I shouldn't have called her nice. But I believed her to be honest and devoted to Greta. And Greta wouldn't part with her. Told me so. A mistaken idea, I now find, about reforming her. I had no idea she drank. She was quite moderate at table. I don't pretend to know as much about women as — I might. I never conceived of a woman drinking. I suppose I have seen too much drink among men." He stepped out into the glare, flicking his whip.

"She had her bouts at long intervals, and Greta got her away. I'm methodical. She would know where to find me. Perhaps it was stupid. Men are stupid. Napoleon said he did a dozen stupid things daily. You know about Napoleon?"

"Not what you would call knowing. I know who he was."

"A man with perhaps the smallest heart and biggest brain that the world ever saw. You should read sometimes, in the long winter evenings. It'd do you good, as it did me, on the Veldt."

"Father doesn't like much reading," said Harmen, apologetically. "He used to come in and stop Roel Slink."

"H'm. I never met your father. But we are all mistaken, in our turn. That was Gladstone's mistake: to think he couldn't make one. Just as it was Cobden's, to think he couldn't reason wrong. We all can reason wrong, the moment we want to."

"Oh, that's true — that's true!" cried Harmen.

"Of course it is. We can only do our best to be fair. I wanted to keep Sannie. By the bye, she told you Greta was my own child. Why do you start?"

"I — when she told me, I started a good deal more."

"It wasn't a lie. For she believed it herself. All the same, it isn't true."

